

Down Here With The Rest Of Us

by Sintendo

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Summary: After being born into a strange new world, the newest Haibane member is forced to have his left arm amputated by the Haibane Renmei. After meeting the the Communicator, he finds that the Tooga are stragely interested in him.

1. emergence

Note: This fan fiction takes place after the events of the Haibane Renmei series. There are sure to be spoilers, so read at your own risk. I am writing this assuming that the reader(s) has watched the entire series, and has a considerable amount of knowledge about the characters of Haibane Renmei.

Also, I would like to add that I came up with my own answers to questions and mysteries that were left unanswered after the end of Haibane Renmei. And since I made up my own theories about the Haibane Renmei universe, you may feel offended or even angry at me. Please, don't get angry and send me hate mail...Seriously, this is a fan fiction. It's just a story. You don't have to read it. So calm down and go eat some blueberries.

**Rules to keep in mind while reading: **

****Bold**** indicates that somebody is shouting in an angry manner

Italics indicate thought

(PC)... Perspective Change - indicates the transition between third person perspective to first person, and vice versa.

* * *

><p>Down Here With The Rest Of Us

A Haibane Renmei fan fiction by

**Sintendo**

chapter one:**_ emergence
> **

The growth of the newly discovered twin cocoons was extremely rapid. Within a period of three weeks, each cocoon was the size of Rakka's original. By the time they were ready to hatch, as determined by Nemu, they had fused together forming one giant cocoon. Expecting a surge of liquid twice the intensity of Rakka's cocoon to burst from within, the residents of Old Home prepared for the worst. From the second floor room where the cocoons occupied, Kana and Rakka built a simple drainage system composed of wooden slides, and leather, leading all the way to the bottom floor and out into the courtyard.

Meanwhile, Hikari and Nemu prepared rooms for the twins in the east wing of Old Home. Each room primarily contained a bed, extra sheets, and a first aid kit to handle the pain and blood-loss when each twin's wings were ready to sprout. Already having experience with the birth of Rakka, the girls were ready for anything...

I was standing on what felt like beads scattered on a soft road. The ground was unstable, and I had to constantly correct my balance. I noticed that I was wearing a sort of gown. It felt as soft as a cloud that was picked out of the sky and spread around my body, though that was not what I felt inside my body. My head pounded with every beat of my heart; my eyes heavy, longing for sleep, but I knew it wouldn't happen. I forced them open, regretting ever doing so. I stared in awe of the sight before me. In the foreground of a dark abyss were millions of clocks surrounding me. Spinning, orbiting, and even taunting me as I dodged any that hurled itself toward me. Desperately, I began to run, not for the nearest exit, but anywhere but here. As I ran, I observed that each clock had its hands pointed to six o'clock. Suddenly each clock began ticking, as if trying to confuse me. I felt each deafening tick pass my ears and flow straight to my bones. With each tick, my knees rattled and eventually I landed face first into the floor.

"What is this?" I thought, "A dream?" As I lay there, unable to move, an unknown force pulled me upright to a standing position. My head was forcefully tilted back; my eyes were held open by what felt like toothpicks. Frantically, I tried to see who or what was forcing me in this awkward position. Trying to focus my attention past the whirling clocks, I saw a giant number six materializing out of nowhere. The number six flew at my face, and tapped my forehead with its tip, causing me to close my eyes as I flinched.

Moments later, I reopened my eyes, expecting to see more clocks, but instead, I was surrounded by gray matter. Oddly enough, I feel weightless and light. Realizing that I am floating underwater, I desperately try to swim upwards toward air, only to find that the ceiling above me was sealed. Still holding my breath, I desperately claw at the walls, hoping that I am able to escape from this strange room. Finally clawing away at the soft areas, I come upon a hard shell-like material. Realizing that this is may be my only way out, I punch through the shell to freedom. The sudden rush of water sends me through the shell, and headfirst into a floor. Feeling dizzy, I close my eyes only to pass out to the sound of voices around me...

"Whoa! What the hell?"

"Ah! It's already happening!"

"Let's hope this drain works!"

"Dammit! This's a lot of water!"

"Hold on everyone!"

"Whoa! Is this a guy?"

"Is he breathing?"

"Yes. What about the other one?"

"She's not breathing!"

"Somebody go get the doctor!"

"Her face is completely blue..."

(PC)...

Old Home was once again aflutter with action and excitement. The news of a newborn Haibane quickly spread throughout the Young Feathers. The entrance of the East wing was completely blocked off with a stern warning on hand made sign, clearly aimed at the children. Simple, yet effective, the sign read:

"DO NOT ENTER OR FEEL THE WRATH OF KANA!"

Kana and Nemu carried the newborn male into the guestroom of the west wing of Old Home. Just a littler bigger than Nemu herself, the two girls struggled with his weight, taking a few breaks along the way. His dark brown hair was shoulder length, prompting the girls to doubt weather he was a male or not. That doubt was quickly erased from the girls mind when Kana accidentally slipped on the stairs, and fell to the floor, which in turn made Nemu drop the newborn onto the strairs with his gown falling up to his chest. Blushing profusely, the girls quickly straightened his gown, and rushed him into the guestroom.

Meanwhile, Hikari ran past the gates of Old Home, dragging along with her an elderly doctor, barely able to keep up. With a stethoscope around his neck, and a bag in his hand, he was clearly a doctor.

She quickly led him to the east wing, careful to avoid from slipping on the wet floors. Entering the birth room of the twins, she pointed to the newborn who wasn't breathing. A teary-eyed Rakka looked up to face the doctor.

"It's been ten minutes and she's still not breathing..., " Sobbed Rakka, "Is there anything you can do?"

The doctor sighed, and kneeled over the newborn, placing his index and middle fingers on her neck. Shaking his head, the doctor pulled from his bag a magnifying glass. He observed the newborn's body, paying close attention to her neck. As he replaced his glass into his

bag, the doctor shook his head as he stood.

"I'm sorry, but there's absolutely nothing I can do." He said sorrowfully, "It seems that something strangled her from inside the cocoon."

Immediately Rakka fell to her knees and began sobbing. She covered her face with her hands, as if trying to hide from the world.

"Nobody deserves this kind of treatment," She sniffed, "She never even had a chance."

"Come on now, Rakka." Hikari said in a comforting manner, "It was an accident. Nobody's to blame for this."

"Actually..." The doctor interrupted, "It appears that the other one had his hand around this one's throat."

"What?" Hikari gasped, "Let me see..."

The doctor pointed to the bruise of the dead girl's neck. It had a faint outline of somebody's hand.

"You don't think that he could be capable of doing this?" Hikari asked the doctor.

"I don't know much about Haibane cocoons, so I would have no idea..." The doctor sighed, "Maybe you should go and ask the Haibane Renmei about this."

(PC)...

I slowly awoke to the sound of dishes clanging in a sink. Immediately, I began to scan the area. Though slightly blurry, I could make out certain objects. To my lower left was what seemed to be a closet. To my immediate right was a nightstand. Further to the right was a table filled with dishes and what seemed to be a toolbox. Sitting around the table were three people, chatting softly amongst themselves. A fourth woman entered through a doorway carrying a tray with a teapot. She placed it on the table and began serving the others tea. I suddenly realized how dry my throat was and began to sit up, immediately feeling pain in my shoulder blade area.

"Goddammit..." I groaned.

Shocked, the girls at the table ran to my side.

"Are you alright?" A girl who wore glasses asked.

"Aww, hell..." I grumbled.

"I guess not..."

"Here, drink this." Said a girl as she handed me a glass.

As I sat up, I slowly brought the glass to my mouth, pouring liquid in. Confirming that it was water, I quickly gulped the entire contents of the glass.

"Thank you." I said as I handed back the glass. Working out a series of blinks, I focused in on the girls surrounding me. Closest to me was a girl wearing a white Japanese school-girl uniform highlighted orange. Her hair was a soft brown and looked as if she was attacked by a static filled balloon.

To her right was the girl who handed me the glass of water. Her hair was black and brushed down. She wore a dark gray Chinese style outfit. To her right was the Girl wearing glasses. Her hair was a light blonde, and held into a ponytail. She wore a white blouse, tied at the collar with some sort of string. Her mini-skirt was plaid, containing various shades of brown. To my left was a sleepy eyed girl.

"No," I thought to myself, "More like a young woman..."

She wore brown, full-length dress, and a pink sweater. She was holding what seemed like a small covered frying pan with a hole in the middle. I blinked a few more times as I noticed that something about them was odd. They each were wearing a pair of charcoal colored wings. Not only were the wings out of place, but they each were also wearing halos, which seemed to be floating above their heads.

"Am I...dead?" I asked all of them. Instead of a straight "yes" or "no" answer they giggled amongst themselves.

"Is this a joke?" I nearly shouted. Calming themselves down, the girls each shook their head.

"No this isn't a joke," The girl in the uniform stated, "We're in the guestroom of a place called 'Old Home'."

"Yeah," Exclaimed the girl with the glasses, "And you're the first male Haibane born here!"

"Haibane?" I asked, "What's that?"

"Ahem!" The girl in the brown dress drew attention. "Before we tell you that, we should introduce ourselves. My name's Nemu."

"I'm Hikari," The girl with glasses said, "nice to meet you!"

"My name's Kana." Said the girl in the Chinese clothes.

"And I'm Rakka." Said the girl in the uniform.

"Uh... hi..." I said timidly, "My name's... uh... I can't remember?"

The girls once again giggled.

"It's not funny." I grumbled.

"Ok, before we determine that, tell us about your dream." Rakka said.

"Uh... My dream?"

"You had one...inside the cocoon?" asked Nemu.

"Yeah, but how did you know?"

"We each had dreams," stated Hikari, "I dreamt of a bright white light. That's why my name's 'Hikari'."

"I dreamt of a river, which is why my name is 'Kana'." She pointed to Nemu, "She was dreaming of sleeping, which is why her name's 'Nemu'."

"And I dreamt that I was falling through the air, which is why I'm called "Rakka'."

"So...you name yourselves according to your dreams?" I asked. They nodded in response.

"So tell us about your dream." Rakka said again.

"Well..." I said, and I closed my eyes, "All I can remember was seeing the number six... a giant number six poking my forehead."

The girls then lowered their head in thought.

"Six..., six..., Roku?" Said Hikari, "How's that for a name?"

"That's great!" Said Nemu.

"Yeah, Roku..." Said Kana.

Nemu handed the frying pan with a hole to Rakka.

"Well then Feather Roku," Rakka said as she used tongs to take out a golden circular object from the pan, placing it above my head , "Welcome to 'Old Home'!"

end chapter one

* * *

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2. seperation

Note: This chapter contains explicit language. Even though you can hear these words in PG-13 movies, I'll say that this is rated R, just in case any of you soccer moms are reading this...

* * *

>chapter two: separation
> **

"You're all crazy..." Roku said under his breath.

"Excuse me?" Nemu shot back. Roku quickly thought of a way to escape from her question.

"Ok, this has gone far enough," He stated as he rose out of the bed, "You can take off those fake wings and those stupid looking halos now. Where are the cameras? Eh?"

> He opened the closet and began digging through the racks of clothes. Finding nothing, he began to search behind each of paintings that were hanging on the walls.<p>

Rakka tried to calm him down, "Roku, I assure you there are no cam-"

"**Goddammit! My name's not 'Roku'!"** He shouted, interrupting Rakka, "It's... it's..." He shook his head in dismay and continued his search.

"Hey!" Kana shouted, "If this is fake, then how would I be able to do this?" Kana then started to move her wings without touching them. Soon all the girls began moving their wings. To further insure that Roku was not dreaming, Hikari started waving her hand between her halo and her head. She then waved it above the halo, making sure any doubts were gone from Roku's mind.

Roku, full of male stubbornness, headed for the mirror that was hanging next to the window. He observed his green eyes, piercing itself in the mirror. He then studied the golden halo floating above his own head. Slowly, he raised his hand and waved between the top of his head, and under the halo.

Nothing. No wires from his head. Next, he waved above the halo. Again, nothing was holding the Halo.

"So...this isn't a dream..."

"No it's not." Rakka said, inching toward him, "And soon, you'll have your own pair of wings."

Roku reached over his left shoulder and felt around the blade area. Huge swells the size of billiard balls were where nothing was supposed to be. Shocked, Roku sat back down on the edge of the bed.

"When?" He asked.

"Soon." Nemu said, "There'll be a lot of pain, and tonight you'll suffer from a heavy fever, but by tomorrow morning you'll be fine. It'll seem like it was a dream..."

Roku closed his eyes and sighed.

"Goddammit..." he grunted, "I need a cig..."

later that evening **
> **

As Roku laid there on his stomach, the girls prepared to receive his wings. There were bundles of cloth piled on the dining table, along with brushes, a tube of ointment, and a dishpan filled with soapy

water. With each passing moment, the pain in Roku's back multiplied its intensity, though being the stubborn male that he is; he kept to himself, only allowing a few grunts and moans of pain to escape from his mouth.

"Are you hurting badly?" Rakka asked as she wiped his back with a warm cloth, "You want some tranquilizers?"

"No..." Roku grunted, "I'm fine, thank you."

As if on cue, a small amount of blood squirted from one of the swells on his back and onto the floor. Roku growled as the pain finally broke his "manliness".

"Oh no! It's started!" Rakka yelped as she ran to get an object from the table. More blood gushed out, this time from both swells. "Bite onto this!" Rakka placed a pair of spoons wrapped in cloth into Roku's mouth.

He accepted, and clamped tightly onto the homemade mouth piece. Hikari and Kana quickly gathered bundles of cloth and placed them on the floor around the bed to prevent anyone from slipping on the blood. Quietly, the girls waited in angst as Roku writhed in pain from the rapid growth of his wings. They all wished that they could somehow stop the pain, or help make the growth more comfortable, but they each knew that nothing could be done. It had to be natural.

Roku held his breath and arched his back. The swells on his back began shaking erratically, spraying blood onto everyone's face. At almost twelve midnight, Roku's wings finally made their violent appearance.

(PC)...

I woke to the soft sound of someone brushing something on my back. Slowly I opened my weary, sleep deprived eyes. Realizing that my face was buried in a pillow, I moved my head to face my left, where the most light came through... I saw a soft image of somebody sitting at my side. She was carefully brushing blood off of what looked like feathers.

"Ra-...Rakka?" I whispered.

"Yes?" She answered.

"Damn... so I'm not home anymore..."

"No."

"Are you... brushing my... wings?"

"Yes."

"You've been up... all night?"

"Yes."

"... Thank you..."

"Hey! I was up too!" It was Hikari. From what I could tell, she was to my right, brushing my other wing.

"Yea! We had to take hourly shifts brushing all the blood from your wings!" Another familiar voice.

I chuckled, "Thank you too, Hikari... Kana..."

"You're welcome!" Kana said sternly. Rakka giggled to herself.

"Where's... Nemu?" I asked.

"She went to the Haibane Renmei to inform them about you and...uh..." Kana trailed off. Suddenly, I could feel the atmosphere of the room go from a warm spring-like feeling, to a cold dark winter.

"And?" I questioned.

"When you were inside the cocoon..." Rakka asked, "Do you remember seeing somebody else?"

I thought as hard as I could. "No...why?"

"Well..." Rakka trailed off as well.

"You're one half of a set of twins." Hikari said.

"Me? Have a twin?"

"Yes."

"Well... where is he?"

"Um..." Rakka whispered, "It's actually a 'she'...and..."

"And?" I was quickly filled with adrenaline. I wanted to see this "twin" of mine.

"I'm sorry... she didn't make it out of the cocoon alive."

I was devastated. There was supposed to be somebody I knew from my past, and now that only link is gone, before I even had any chance to ask about anything.

"Dammit..." I cursed myself.

(PC)...

A soft knocking came from the guestroom door. Slowly, Nemu crept in, followed by seven members of the Haibane Renmei, along with the honored Communicator. Strangely, two of the Renmei Members were carrying bags that sounded as if it contained metal.

"They've come to collect the body..." Nemu said quietly, "And to... uh..."

"That is enough." The Communicator demanded. He then made hand signals toward a few Renmei members. Complying with his orders, three of the Renmei left the room.

"What's all this about?" Rakka asked, "What's wrong with Roku?"

Ignoring her, The Communicator made more hand symbols toward the remaining Renmei Members in the room. Rakka suddenly felt the blood rush from her head to her legs, recognizing the symbol for "saw". Stumbling to regain her balance, she confronted the communicator.

"What are you going to do with Roku?"

The Communicator turned to face Rakka. He examined her face quietly as tears began flowing from her eyes. Slowly, he walked over to Roku, who was still lying face down. He picked up his left arm, showing to Rakka a black scar running from his wrist to his shoulder. The girls gasped in horror at the sight before them.

"You are the newborn, yes?" The Communicator asked Roku, "What is your name?"

Still filled with pain from his wings, Roku quietly answered.

"It's...Roku."

"Feather Roku, you had a twin accompany you. True?"

Roku was silent.

"Sadly, she was killed even before she was born... Do you know why?"

"Killed?.."

"Your left arm is possessed. It strangled her to death."

"What?"

"You are sin-bound!" He stated.

"I...don't understand!" Rakka retorted, "How can he be sin-bound? His feathers don't have a spot of black on them!"

"**What's going on?**" Roku frantically asked as the Renmei Members turned him onto his back, "What's all this sin-bound crap?"

"Unlike you, Rakka," The Communicator began, "This boy had no control over his own sin. An outside source took control of his left arm, forcing it to strangle the unborn girl."

"What?" Rakka asked, "What kind of outside source?"

"That is only something that he can answer. But we must first have him rid of his arm, lest his sin be spread throughout his entire body."

"**What?"** Roku screamed. The Renmei Members opened one of the bags and drew several leather belts. Immediately, they began restraining

Roku's legs, strapping them down to the bed. Another Renmei member wrapped a belt around Roku's right arm, tying it to the upper bed post. His left arm was then strapped by a belt connected to a small table. A Renmei Member then sat on it, rendering Roku completely immobile.

"Rakka?" Hikari asked, "What are they saying?"

"What are they gonna do?" Nemu questioned.

The Communicator bent down to open the other bag. To the girls' horror, The Communicator drew a surgical saw. They each closed their eyes, avoiding seeing anymore of the silver instrument.

"**What the fuck's that for?"** Roku shouted, **"GOD NO! PLEASE, NO!"** He tried desperately to escape from the restraints.

"Please leave." The Communicator ordered the girls. They all walked slowly out the door, and into the hallway. Rakka was the last to exit.

"Nemu! Help! Please! Kana! Hikari!" Roku screamed, **"RAKKA! NO! COME BACK!"**

Her heart filled with sadness, she regretfully closed the door behind her, leaving a screaming Roku in the hands of The Communicator. From within the guestroom, the wails of the newborn shattered any type of barrier. His screams echoed that of every muscle fiber that was ripped apart from his body. The sickening sound of flesh being torn apart went straight past the girls' ears and into their hearts. They all fell to the floor, helpless, unable to do anything to comfort him. They each covered their ears, trying to dampen the siren-like call for help. The Young Feathers of Old Home ran straight for their rooms, hiding in the closet, scared of the monstrous noise that came from Roku's lungs. The Haibane of Abandoned Factory came out of their rooms, trying to find out what was that horrid noise. The entire town of Glie was suddenly saddened, realizing that somebody, somewhere was in great pain, and nothing could be done.

Seconds later, a stomach-churning grinding noise was heard. The Girls knew that they had reached bone. Roku begged them to stop cutting. When they didn't acknowledge his cries, he began pleading for God to stop them from cutting anymore. He made sure his voice could be heard from heaven. Frustrated that God wouldn't answer, he began threatening the Renmei Members. His voice became hoarse, matching the sound of the saw boring through the bone, and back into muscle.

In a matter of minutes, the hellish act was done. The ghoulish screams softened into quite sobs. The girls hesitantly reentered the room one at a time. They all gasped as one of the Renmei members wrapped Roku's severed arm and placed it in a black sack. Two of the Renmei Members were quickly cleaning up the blood that stained the floor, walls and even the ceiling. The remaining Renmei Member untied Roku from the bed, replacing the belts into the bag that it came in.

The Communicator wiped the blood from the silver saw, handing it to one of the Renmei, who quickly placed it into it's case, and exited the room, following the others.

"Roku," Said The Communicator, "I understand the pain of losing a limb, but it had to be done, to save the life of not only yourself, but also the entire town of Guri."

Roku, still sobbing, covered his eyes with his forearm, ignoring the Communicator.

The Communicator reached into his cloak and withdrew a small brown booklet. "You are now recognized as a member of The Haibane Renmei. This will guarantee you your daily life. As a Haibane, your duty is to work in the town of Guri, showing a good example for the Young Feathers to see."

Furious, Roku snatched the booklet from The Communicator's hands, flinging it across the room. He then returned to his original position.

The Communicator walked over to the girls, handing Nemu a small bottle.

"Make sure to apply this to his wound every night, taking care to replace his bandages." He then turned to Rakka, "Have him come to the temple as soon as he is ready." He then turned and exited the room, leaving the girls alone with Roku.

end chapter two

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3. overcomming

* * *

> Note: Slight reference to something in the videogame world... see if you can find it.

* * *

>chapter three: overcoming_

Over the next five days, the girls would take turns stopping by the guestroom to drop off small meals for Roku. One girl would stop by in the morning to drop off whatever they had for breakfast. In the afternoon, another would clean up the untouched food and prepare a small lunch, setting it on the dining table. Then at dinnertime, Rakka would accompany whoever would bring dinner to Roku. She would have Roku sit up as she carefully removed his bandages, applying the herbal balm that the Communicator had given her. After she was done applying the balm, she would wrap Roku's wounds with a fresh bandage. As Rakka busied herself, Roku would not say a single word.

On the sixth morning, it was Rakka's turn to deliver the pancakes that was served for breakfast. Entering the guestroom, she was surprised to see Roku sitting at the dining table, quietly nibbling on the biscuits that were served last night. The expression that was one his face was not that of a person that was grieving or angry, but instead was a look of confusion and thought. He blinked only a few times as Rakka silently poured him some freshly brewed tea, and served him the pancakes.

"Good morning," she said, finally breaking the awkward silence, "How are you feeling?"

"I can still feel my arm..." Roku whispered.

"Huh?"

"My arm... it's like...it's still there..." He rubbed his left side.

"Um..." Rakka thought, "Oh! I've read about that before. I believe it's called 'The Phantom Limb' effect..."

"Oh..."

Rakka looked upon the boy who sat before her. His expression still wasn't that of a sad person. She then noticed that he was still wearing the gown that he was born in, only this time caked with blood.

"Um..." She began.

"Let's go for a walk." Roku interrupted. "I want to see the town. Um... that is, if you can..."

Shocked that Roku had read her mind, she smiled and nodded.

"Yeah, that's a good idea!" She agreed, "We need to get you some new clothes anyways. And while we're in town, we can visit the others at their jobs."

Roku looked at his gown.

"Oh!" Rakka said, "We can't have you walking around in those, now can we?"

She walked over to the closet, rummaging through the various piles of clothing, looking for something suitable for Roku to wear. Finally after a few moments of searching, she found a pair of old black jeans and a gray long sleeve shirt.

"Ah!" She exclaimed, "This should be good enough 'till we get to the thrift store. And you can find some shoes that fit over here in the closet."

"Thrift store?" Roku asked, finishing the plate of pancakes.

"Yes." Rakka said, "It's a rule that a Haibane can only use items that humans no longer want or need."

"Why?"

"I don't know..." She trialed off, "But that doesn't matter." She tossed the clothes to Roku, "That's why we're so good a sewing, so we can repair and alter the clothes that we have."

"Oh."

"I'll be downstairs getting the Young Feathers ready for class. There's a washroom over there. When you're done, just wait for me where the name tags are hanging."

Roku nodded as she left him alone.

(PC)...

As I found my way to the washroom, I noticed a few pictures hanging on the wall. What caught my attention was not the painting itself, but how the paint was stroked upon the canvas. On a painting of grassy hills, the brush strokes were soft and flowed freely, as if the brush guided the painter's hand throughout the canvas. But on a much darker painting of what seemed to be a country road during a storm, the brush strokes looked as though they were forced. Sharp lines were defined, separating the sky from the horizon, not blended like the other. I would have to ask Rakka about this.

Entering the washroom, I noticed a mirror hanging over the sink. Hesitantly, I slowly crept over and saw myself for the fist time since I came to this world. I took off my gown, inspecting my left side a littler closer. My chest was wrapped in bandages, and where my left arm should have been was instead a small lump. Running my hand over the soft stump, a feeling of sadness welled up inside of me. I imagined that if I tried hard enough, my left arm would just pop out of my shoulder, and everything would be fine from then on. My eyes swelled with tears as reality knocked me in the head as pain shot from my shoulder throughout my whole body. It was never coming back.

I tapped my forehead against the mirror, making a soft thud. Strangely, about a second later, there came several small taps from the mirror. I suddenly remembered what it was: my halo. I stared at it in amusement, forgetting about my arm. Then in the background, I spied my wings for the first time. I took my left wing in hand, and studied it. It felt exactly like a giant chicken wing, only this time I was at the receiving end, as well as the giving. The feathers were softer than any others that I've felt before. Instead of being pure white, it was colored a soft charcoal grey. I petted my wings over and over, still not over the fact that they were mine.

After a few minutes of groping myself, I put on the boxers and black jeans that Rakka had found. They were a little big, but they were more comfortable than the gown that I wore. Then I wondered how I was supposed to put on a shirt with wings. I examined the shirt carefully and found that two slits were made on the back. Struggling a bit, I managed to put on the shirt, finding out that it too was a little bit bigger. Feeling awkward about my left side, I tucked the left sleeve of the shirt inside. I then pulled the shirt closer to my back, allowing my wings to pop through.

"Hmmm...,"_ I thought to myself, "I wonder..."_

I tried flapping my wings, only to fail.

_ "Eh? It won't move?" _

Trying harder, I concentrated on moving the left wing first. To my surprise, my left wing stretched itself, showing me its full length.

_ "Heh... no trouble at all..." _

I then succeeded in moving my right wing. Feeling a bit playful and proud at the same time, I alternated in moving my left wing, then my right. When a few moments had passed, I congratulated myself for mastering my wings.

_ "Ha! Damn I'm good!" _

Exiting the washroom, I went to the closet to look for a pair of shoes to wear. Digging through the piles of shoes in a chest, I found a nice looking pair of white tennis shoes. I slipped them on, not bothering to untie them. Satisfied with the feel of the shoes, I headed out of the guestroom and found my way out to the courtyard. Standing in the middle of the yard, I stared in awe at the beautiful buildings surrounding me. I knew this place from somewhere before, but I couldn't quite put my finger on when and where.

The birds sang softly as I found where Rakka wanted me to wait. I examined the nametags hanging on what looked like some sort of bulletin board. I saw that Kana, Hikari, and Nemu's names were in red while the rest were white. Wondering what this meant, I noticed my name hanging near the end. I took it from the wall and studied it, finding out that on one side it was printed in red while it was white on the other.

"Sorry to keep you waiting!" Rakka shouted as she ran toward me, dragging a little girl behind her.

"Oh." I said, "I didn't wait long. I just got here myself." I saw the little girl staring at me. "Who's this?"

"Oh, this is one of the Young Feathers." Rakka said, "Go ahead and introduce yourself."

"My name's 'Hana', " The little girl said as she bowed to me, "Nice to meet you!"

"She's coming with us to town because she needs new clothes too." Rakka said.

"My name's 'Roku', " I smiled, extending my hand "It's a pleasure to meet you Hana."

She took my hand and shook it. She then gasped as she noticed my left side.

"What's wrong with your arm?" She asked

"Hana..." Rakka whispered.

"It's okay," I assured Rakka, "It was taken from me." I told Hana.

"Why?"

"Because I didn't eat my vegetables." I said, smiling.

"No way!" Hana shouted, "That's impossible!"

"Okay..." I said teasing her further by shrugging my shoulders. Hana stood there, dumbfounded.

"Hahaha..." Rakka laughed, "Now do you see why Reki wanted you to eat your carrots?"

_ "Reki?" _ I thought, "Who's that?"

"Hmm?" she responded, "Oh...well it's sort of a long story... I'll tell you tonight at dinner, when everyone gets back from work. That way, everyone can tell you about her."

"Oh... okay..." I said as I began to walk toward the road.

"Oh, before you go, Roku, make sure to turn your nametag so that the red side shows. That way, whoever is home knows you're still out." She turned her nametag over, as well as Hana's.

"Oh," I said, "So that's what's it's for." I placed my nametag on its hook, red-side out. The three of us then began walking toward town.

The sound of the three of us walking on the dirt road was Zen-like. The scratching of our shoes on the road made me feel nostalgic. I knew this road, but from when and where was all a mystery to me. We passed gigantic windmills on a picturesque field, what Rakka called "The Hill of Winds". The whirring sound of the blades slicing through the air made me feel at home. I wondered if the town itself would make me feel this way.

"Oh!" Rakka broke the silence, "Here's your Haibane Renmei booklet." She said handing me a small brown book.

"Uh... okay... What's it for?"

"We use it the same way people would use money." She informed me, "The Haibane of this town aren't allowed to possess normal paper money, so we write down what we earn from our jobs and use this instead."

"Uh... jobs?" I asked, "What kind of jobs?"

"Well, we're actually limited to only a few jobs around town. Kana works at that clock tower over there in the west." She pointed toward the town. "Hikari works at the bakery on the far north end, and Nemu works at that big building near the middle. That's the library."

"Where do you work?" I asked

"Well..." She thought, "I work at the Haibane Renmei temple during

the afternoon. I also help the house mother take care of the Young Feathers when I can."

"House mother?"

"She's this old lady who always makes us eat yucky stuff!" Hana said.

"Hana!" Rakka scolded, "She's not as mean as she makes her sound. The house Mother is a really nice lady. She also acts as their teacher."

"She sounds like a good woman." I said.

"She is." Rakka said as we crossed a small bridge.

"Do you think I'll be able to find work?" I asked.

"Of course. People are always willing to hire us Haibane, because we work hard!" Rakka said cheerfully.

_ "Easy for you to say." _ I thought to myself, rubbing my left side.

(PC)...

The town of Guri was as lively as ever. Flower wreaths decorated every balcony that Rakka, Roku, and Hana passed. A crowd of people was gathered at what Rakka confirmed to be one of the most expensive bistros in town.

"I wonder what's going on?" Roku asked.

"I don't know." Rakka said, "Looks like a wedding." She pointed out a woman dressed in a pure white dress, sitting with a man on a long table that everyone faced.

Just as the three were about to leave, the woman dressed in white called out to them.

"Excuse me!" She yelled as she and the man sitting next to her ran to greet them, "Could you Haibane do us an important favor?" She looked at the man who held her arm. They both seemed very excited.

"Yes." Rakka agreed, "What can we do for you?"

"Well...it's kind of embarrassing to ask but..." The man bowed, "Could we have a feather from each of your wings?"

"Eh? A feather?" Roku said, "What for?"

"Well, legend says that if a Haibane man, woman, and child pass by on your wedding day," The woman started, "And you are able to get one feather from each, you will live happily ever after." She sighed in a gleeful manner.

"So you two are getting married?" Asked Roku.

"Yes." The man said, "And I know in my heart that I will forever be by my wife's side." He started blushing, "But having Haibane feathers

would practically guarantee our union for all eternity."

Rakka smiled, "Sure help yourself!" She turned around.

"Wow! Thank you!" The woman said, gently plucking the best feather she could find off of Rakka's wing.

"Here, you can have all you want!" Hana said, "Only if you promise to stay together forever!"

"We promise!" The man said, "Thank you young lady!" He then carefully plucked the best feather that he could find on Hana's wing.

"Um...", Roku hesitated. He didn't want anyone touching his wing.

"Come on, Roku." Rakka said, "It's for good luck!"

_ "As if I could bring good luck..." _he thought.

"Please?" The woman asked, "The legend says that we need one feather from a man, woman, and child..."

"Okay..." He sighed as he turned. The woman giggled, and then proceeded to pluck the best looking feather from Roku's wing.

"Thank you! If we ever see you again, you'll always be welcome at our place!" The bride and groom then ran back to the bistro, proudly announcing that they received the feathers. The crowd at the bistro began cheering excitedly as the band played a sort of uplifting number.

"Heheh," Rakka chuckled, "I hope they have the best years ahead of them."

Finally reaching the thrift store, the three entered quietly, spotting the old clothes dealer wearing headphones, listening to what sounded like upbeat jazz on the highest volume setting.

"Welcome." He said almost instinctively, "What can I-, hey you're a new face. Newborn?"

"Uh... yeah..." Roku answered.

"He was just born a few days ago." Rakka said, "Go ahead and find some clothes you like, Roku."

"Roku, eh?" The man said. "Well Roku, it's nice to meet you." He extended his arm out, which Roku received and shook, "The name's Horton, nice to meet ya."

"Likewise." Roku said.

"Go ahead and pick out what you want over there." he pointed to a clothes rack near the back of the store.

"You have anything for this little one?" Rakka asked, gently pushing Hana forward.

"Uh... yeah..." Horton said, reaching for a box behind him. "Here,

pick out what you want, cutie."

Hana happily stood on top of a chair and began sifting through the box of clothes. She frowned at the lack of colors, but was still happy to dig through, hoping to find a treasure.

Meanwhile, Roku was sifting through the seemingly hundreds of articles of clothing, mostly made for girls. Then something in the corner of the store caught his eye. It wasn't bright, nor colorful, but somehow it reminded him of something. It was a plaid brown collard shirt. He took it off the rack and inspected it, making sure there weren't any rips or holes. Satisfied, he turned his attention to something that was hanging on the wall next to where the shirt was. It was a leather belt that carried with it a silver buckle, about the shape and size of two thumbs stacked one on top of another. He took it off the hook that it hung from, and tried it out, carefully weaving it through the belt holes of his jeans, buckling it when it came full circle. He glanced to a mirror on his right. Seeing himself dressed this way stirred hundreds of thoughts in his head, none of which he could grasp. He shook his head, clearing his mind.

Satisfied with the belt and the shirt, he took both to the counter, where Horton was busy helping Hana wade through the box of clothes. Hana found a blue shirt and matching pants that she seemed to enjoy.

"Ooh!" She said excitedly, "I want these!"

"Heh, okay." Rakka said, "What about you, Roku?"

"I'll take these." Roku said.

"Hm?" Horton looked up, "Okay. You sure you don't want anything else?"

"No, I'm fine." Roku said, "But...I uh..." He pulled out his Haibane notebook and noticed that it was empty.

"Don't worry about it, Roku." Rakka said as she took out her notebook, "That's why I came with you." She wrote something on a page of the book, tore it out and handed it to Horton. He then took the shirts and began altering them, adding holes for Roku and Hana's wings.

"So it's free now, eh?" Rakka jested.

"Ha!" Horton laughed, "Only for newborns and young'uns." They both laughed. "Oh, hey. You want me to alter this sleeve for you?" He asked Roku.

"Uh... yeah..." Roku said looking at his left side, "Thanks."

"No prob." Horton then began whistling as he altered the clothes.

After a few minutes of waiting, Roku put on the newly altered shirt over the gray long sleeve that he already wore. He noticed that the left sleeve was gone and covered up, making the shirt fit more comfortably.

"You have a good sense of style." She complemented him, "It makes the old clothes that I found in the closet look brand new again."

"Thanks." He blushed, "It feels great on me." He hopped in place a little bit. "Not too big and not too small... juuuuust right." He smiled.

Almost out of nowhere, an elderly woman struggling to push a scooter approached them.

"Excuse me, young man," She said, "Could you please help me push this to the repair shop down this street? My husband works there, and I need him to fix this for me."

"Eh? Me?" Roku asked, pointing to himself, "Well, I could take a look at it if you want... I have a knack for this kind of stuff."

"You do?" Both Rakka and the woman asked at the same time.

"Uh... I think so..." Roku said, kneeling beside the scooter and taking off a cover, exposing the engine. He poked around for a bit, making sure not to damage any vital lines or parts. After a few moments, he closed the engine compartment, standing up and wiping the dirt off his pants. "That should do it. Go ahead and start it."

The woman quickly put her key into the ignition and turned it, successfully starting the small engine.

"Thank you, young man!" She said happily, "Why don't you work at my husband's garage? He already has an assistant, but I'm sure that he needs extra help, what with his bad back and all..."

"Oh, it's okay Ma'am." Roku said modestly, "The engine was just flooded with gas. All I did was open the carburetor and let all the unburned gas escape."

"Nonsense." She said, "Please follow me."

"But I-... uh... my arm..." Roku hesitated, looking upon Rakka for advice.

"I'm sure he wouldn't care as long as you work hard." She said to Roku, "Why not do something you're good at as well?"

"I guess..." Roku said.

"Good." Rakka said, "Hana and I need to run a few errands before I need to get to work. Also, the Haibane Renmei wants to see you. To get to the temple, just take the right path past the bridge. Then just follow the road, all the way to the temple. When you get there, somebody will put bells on your wings. Raising your right wing means 'yes' and your left means 'no'. You can't talk to any of them, so you have to do this in order to communicate with them. Most likely you'll see that masked man who...uh... amputated your arm... uh... he's known as the 'Communicator' and he's the only one who's allowed to speak." She paused, "I'll meet you back home. Take care until then. Bye, Roku"

"Bye-bye, Roku!" Hana waved.

"Later..." Roku waved back. He then turned and followed the old woman to her husband's garage, still doubting whether he could handle becoming a mechanic with only one arm...

(PC)...

I followed the old lady into the garage that was left wide open. Inside, an old gray haired man was sitting on a stool, barking orders at a young man who seemed to be working on a small vehicle. They both wore gray T-Shirts over navy blue overalls, and blue baseball caps. The young man also wore a backpack, for what reason I didn't know. The old man, who looked like he stood a good six feet or more, had his hair tied into a pony tail, which hung all the way down to reach the back of his knees. He also wore a beard/moustache mix, which was shaved to give it a sharp look. His grumpy expression quickly faded away as his wife greeted him.

"How was your day, dear?" She asked as she kissed him.

"Fine." He kissed her back, "And you?"

"This young Haibane helped me fix my scooter." She pointed in my direction.

"Err..." I bowed, "It was nothing sir."

"Nonsense," She defended, "I tried everything to start it again, but nothing worked until he helped. You ought to consider hiring him. You need the help after all."

The old man looked at me with intense eyes. He studied me closely; I suddenly felt his gaze go straight for my missing arm.

"So, you seem to be good with these kind of things, eh?" He snuffed, "Show me what ya got." He tossed a wrench to me. I caught it just as it was about to hit me square in the forehead. "The guy's at the sheep farm keep complaining that their generator isn't working. Go see what's wrong with it." He pointed to a small gasoline powered generator in the corner. His assistant stopped working on the vehicle and joined the old man watching me from a workbench full of tools and spare parts.

Immediately, I ran to the generator and started to check its major components. After a few moments of poking around, I found the problem.

"The piston is shot." I told the old man, "It needs to be replaced." I got up and wiped my hand on a rag I found on the ground.

"Didn't I tell you?" The old woman said to her husband, "I told you he was good."

"Heh." The old man grunted. He grabbed a metallic object from the workbench and tossed it my way. I caught it in the air this time.

"Replace it." He commanded.

I gulped; I knew how to replace it, but I didn't know if I could do it one handed. Taking a deep breath, once again knelt beside the generator. Carefully, I removed several parts to get at the broken piston. After that was done, I cautiously placed the new piston into position, using my knees to assist my right arm. The awkward balancing and juggling act with the piston using my hand and knees lasted a few minutes, but finally, it was done, and the piston was in place. The rest was simple, and easily completed. I then took the key and inserted it into the ignition. Still nervous, I slowly turned the key. To my good fortune, the engine started.

I stood and wiped the sweat from my face and forehead. The three that had watched me began clapping; an obvious approval of my work.

"Bravo!" the old woman congratulated me.

"Heh, bravo, indeed." Said the old man, "You start tomorrow morning at eight. You and Hyoko here open up the shop and watch it for a while, I usually come in at around nine." He extended his hand, "The name's Gordon. Gordon Freeman."

"Roku..." I said as I shook his hand.

"Magdalene." The old woman said shaking my hand, "But everyone calls me 'Maggie'. It's a pleasure to have met you."

"Likewise." I said.

"Hey." The young man said to me, "Nice job. The name's Hyoko." He didn't extend his hand to shake mine, but instead lifted his baseball cap that he wore, exposing a golden halo underneath.

"You're a Haibane too?" I asked.

"Yeah." He said putting his cap back on, "You live at Old Home?"

"Yeah... how come I've never seen you before?"

"Abandoned Factory." He said, "It's to the east of here."

"Okay girls!" Gordon interrupted, "Enough chit-chat! Hyoko! Get back to work! Roku! I don't wanna see your face 'till tomorrow morning! Now get outta here!"

Instantly, Hyoko was back underneath the small vehicle that he was working on. I on the other hand stood there, wondering what Hyoko meant about an abandoned factory.

"Hey! One-armed bandit! Get the hell outta here before I fire you!" Gordon commanded again.

I bowed to Gordon and his wife, and left. I had a job. And I was damn happy to have one.

*end chapter three*

* * *

>disclaimer: with the exception of Roku, Gordon, Magdalene, and the name "Horton" for the old clothes dealer, I do not own any characters that have made an appearance in the story. I did this for fun, not for money. If you own these characters, please don't sue me. Please don't ruin my fun. Also, this story is only allowed to appear on If you wish to paste this onto your site, please ask permission first and give credit where credit's due.

4. good advice

Note: I'm going to add what might seem like a horrible object that would seem to never fit into the Haibane Renmei universe: a gun._

Now this may turn some of you off, but hopefully you'll see past the gun and realize why I chose to put it into my story. Hopefully I can pull it off...

Also, if you're a fan of Kino's journey and Cowboy Bebop, look out for the small references that I put in for fun._

Oh, and my friends wondering how old Roku looked compared to the others (i.e.: Nemu looks like she's about 18 or 19 compared to Rakka who looks like she around 14 or 15). Anyways, I suppose Roku would be older looking than Kana (Who, in my opinion looks to be about 16) and younger than Nemu, but definitely older than Rakka. That answer your questions? _

Note #2: Also, somebody sent an anonymous e-mail and has brought to my attention that The Communicator's "Official" name is "Washi" and that a human was given a name (Sumika or Sumiko...) and that it is spelled "Hyouko" not "Hyoko" AND that it's spelled "Glie" not "Guri". That somebody then went on the write a bazillion page essay on why I should find out the correct names before I put them into a story. Well goddamn, I've only watched the entire series once, I'm bound to forget a few things (like ONE name) and I didn't even know how to spell "Hyouko" or "Glie" until now. I didn't READ the anime...
—

Oh, and my friend tells me that "Washi" roughly translates to "Communicator". So there._

Besides, I'm typing this in English. **ENGLISH.**_

* * *

>chapter four: good advice_

As I walked my way toward the town exit, I took the time to absorb the local atmosphere. As I passed a small cafÃ©, I observed several people chatting away, sipping on their hot beverages, and laughing once in a while. The smell of freshly baked bread wafted through the air and entered my nostrils. I took a deep breath, clearing out my sinuses. Quickly, I accepted this town as my new home.

Exiting the town, the air's scent changed from fresh produce to the scent of freshly cut grass. The gentle breeze blew my hair around, making me feel welcome.

"This is great!" I thought to myself, "I think I'm gonna love it here."

As I neared the bridge, I spotted the road that led to a small mountain.

"This looks the road that Rakka said would lead to the temple." I thought, "Looks like it'll take quite some time before I get there..."

I began walking, quickening my pace as the road increased in angle. After a few moments of walking, I reached a rickety looking rope bridge, which hung next to a waterfall. Cautiously, I crossed the swaying bridge, hoping that it would support me. I took a deep breath after reaching solid ground once again.

"God, I don't wanna do that again." I thought.

Making my way past a narrow strip, I eventually reached the temple. Located at the side of a cliff, it appeared to be some sort of short tower. Outside was a man wearing a black cloak. His face was entirely covered in what looked like a flat mask made of wood. In his hands, he held a sickle and a basket filled with greens. I assumed that he was picking vegetables.

As I approached, he put down his equipment and met me at the entrance. He pulled out bells from his cloak and placed them on top of my wings. He then took my hand and tied a bracelet around my wrist. He pointed me into the direction of the entrance. I slowly entered the temple.

Inside, I saw what seemed like a small forest. I was shocked at the sheer size of the forest; the outside had seemed to be much smaller than in here. I jumped as a familiar voice bellowed toward me, coming from all directions. I had recognized his tone; it was the Communicator

"Have you recovered?" He asked.

I responded by moving my right wing, remembering what Rakka had told me.

"Good. Please, walk forward."

I walked a little bit, finding a small gazebo near a small lake. Inside, the Communicator was sitting on a bench.

"Sit." He commanded.

I quickly sat next to him. From afar he looked as if he stood at only five and a half feet, a few inches shorter than me. Sitting next to him, I clearly saw that he was much taller than I, by at least another foot.

"How is your arm?" He asked.

I sat there silently, not knowing if I was allowed to speak or not.

"You may speak." He assured me.

Breathing a sigh of relief, I spoke to him.

"It doesn't hurt as much anymore." I rubbed my shoulder, "I still can't believe it's gone though..."

"How was your walk through town?"

"Eh? Well... Rakka, Hana and I met this newlywed couple that asked us for some feathers. Then we went to the thrift store so that I could get some clothes. And Then I found a job at a repair shop..."

"Did you feel... strange... as you walked through town?"

"Yes, but how... did you know?" I was shocked.

"How did you feel?" He asked.

"Well..." I thought for a moment, "I felt like I knew this place and this shirt and belt... from somewhere...But I can't quite remember. It all feels familiar somehow..."

"Hmm..." He thought.

We sat there together in silence. The both of us never moved an inch, basking in the atmosphere of the forest. He finally reached inside his cloak, pulling out an item.

"The Tooga have learned about your ordeal. They wish to give you this as condolence." He handed me a small wooden box, "Open it."

I placed the box on my lap, and unlatched the lock, located on the face of the box. Slowly opening it, I was shocked to see what the box held. Inside was an ornate revolver, loaded with six bullets. I picked it up, feeling the detailed carvings that decorated the grip. The carvings looked like an abstract mix of lines and circles with no particular purpose other than to provide a rough area to hold onto. The grip itself was made of a high quality wood; fire hardened and colored a deep brown. The chambers and the barrel was polished silver, reflecting my face as I took a closer look.

"They advised for you to wear it at all times." The Communicator said. He motioned for me to stand and take off my brown shirt. He then wrapped a leather holster around my chest. "There is ammunition in the box."

"Who are the Tooga?" I asked.

"They are people from outside of town. They come here to trade with us every once in a while. They are not allowed to approach humans, so I communicate with them, making deals and bartering and such..."

"How did they know about me?"

"That I do not know..." The Communicator said. "I know you have many questions, but that will be all for today." He started to walk away.

"Wait!" I said, "What do I need a pistol for? This town is so

peaceful. Wouldn't carrying a gun around frighten the residents?"

"I do not know why the Tooga would want you to wear a weapon... But I would do so if I were you. Gifts from the Tooga are rare, and advice from them is even more so." He turned and started to walk into the forest. "You should do as they say. I'll call for you for our next meeting."

I sat there for a moment, thinking to myself as I stared at the beautifully made weapon in my hand. Again, a wave of nostalgia hit me. I knew this gun from somewhere.

"What the hell..." I thought, "It's just like the feeling I had when I picked out my clothes..."

Taking this feeling as an omen, I placed the pistol into the holster that the communicator put on me. I then put my shirt back on, buttoning it up this time. I picked up the box from the bench, and quickly exited the temple, heading back home.

(PC)...

As Roku approached the road that led to Old Home, a familiar voice called out to him.

"Roku!" It was Kana, "Glad to see you're up!"

"Good afternoon, Kana." Roku greeted her, "What's up?"

"I just got off from work." She noticed his clothes, "Ooh, nice clothes. Man, you got lucky finding those at the thrift store." She smiled at him.

"Eh?" He looked at his shirt, "Well, I only got this shirt and this belt," He lifted his shirt, showing Kana the black leather belt, "Rakka found the pants and long-sleeve in the closet. I found these shoes in there as well."

"Eh?" she said, "Man, if I only I found that long-sleeve when I was born..." She started laughing. "Hey, you need a ride?" She pointed to the back of her bike.

"Hm? You sure you can ride that thing with me on?"

"Don't worry about it!" She flexed her arms, "I'm as strong as an ox! Mwahahaha!"

Roku smiled, "Okay, if you insist..." He sat on the rack behind Kana. She balanced the bike, and then stood on the pedals, pushing as hard as she could. After gaining enough momentum, she sat back down, pedaling at a relaxed pace.

"See?"

"Ha... strong as an ox."

The ride back to Old home was short and quiet. Kana never had talked to a male Haibane before, not even the guys at Abandoned Factory, so she was a little nervous.

As they reached the gate of Old Home, Roku hopped off the bike and checked the nametag wall. Rakka and Hana were already back, as well as Hikari and Nemu. He turned his nametag over, doing the same for Kana as she rested her bike against the wall.

"I wonder where they all are." Roku asked.

"Hm? Oh they're most likely in the kitchen preparing dinner. The Young feathers should be in the den playing or something." Kana started walking toward the building straight ahead. "This way."

She led Roku into the biggest building in Old Home. Sure enough, the children were inside, playing amongst each other. Roku looked around and saw the children stare at him in awe.

"What?" He asked, "What's wrong?"

"See!" it was Hana's voice, "I told you! He said he lost his arm because he never ate his vegetables!" She pointed to Roku. The children all gasped and gathered around him.

"Hm?" Kana looked at Roku, who was blushing after being the center of attention. Questions were thrown at him from every direction.

"Did it hurt?"

"How'd it come off?"

"Did somebody cut it off?"

"Where's your arm now?"

Just as Roku was about to say something, Nemu entered, emerging from a door across the room.

"Hey, leave him alone." She said, "It's dinner time. Go on and get!" She led them to another room. They all groaned along the way.

In a playful mood, Roku warned them, "And eat your vegetables or you'll end up like me!" The children all screamed as they ran into the dining room, quickly gobbling down the greens from their plate.

"Ha!" Kana laughed, "'Bout time somebody got them to eat their veggies! Good job, Roku!"

Roku laughed at the thought, "I just hope they don't turn green..."

"Heh, I think that would be an improvement." Nemu chuckled, "Come on, dinner's ready."

She led them to another room adjacent to the room where the children were eating. Inside, a long wood dining table was covered in dishes and containers filled with food. He spotted Rakka and Hikari already sitting at opposite ends of the table. Nemu and Kana quickly sat at their pre-determined seats. Roku, on the other hand, didn't know where to sit.

"Your seat is over here." Rakka said, reading Roku's mind. She

pointed to the end of the table where the biggest seat was located.

"Uh... you sure?" He asked, "What about the house mother?"

"Oh, she likes to eat with the children." Hikari said, "Come on and sit!"

"Why so elaborate?" He asked, "I mean it's kinda fancy."

"Well the house mother said that traditionally men always sat at the front." Nemu said, "We've never had a man here, so we're new at this."

"And besides, that's the only spot left open." Rakka said.

"If you insist..." Roku then sat at the helm. Almost immediately, the girls filled his plate with the food that they prepared. Hikari spooned mixed greens onto his plate as Rakka placed a slice of the roast beef. Nemu poured gravy on top of the meat and vegetables, and then placed a dinner roll onto his bread plate. He sighed, "Don't tell me... the house mother said that men get their food first, right?"

The three girls nodded.

"Well, that's fine and all, but I don't really like being the center of attention." He said, "Please, just treat me like you would yourselves."

"Okay, if you say so..." Hikari stopped serving him and began serving herself. Rakka looked a little disappointed and began serving the other girls slices of the roast beef. Nemu began sipping her glass of water. Kana, on the other hand, was already working on her third helping of dinner rolls, waiting for the meat to land on her plate.

"Come on," Kana said as she chewed a wad of bread, "It's not like he's only here for a while."

"Yes, but," Rakka started, "The house mother told us that it's tradition..."

"I'm fine Rakka." Roku assured her, "Please, I don't really like special treatment."

"Okay." She said, helping herself to the mixed vegetables.

(PC)...

The conversations we had during dinner were small; usually ending up centered toward me. I told them about my new job and about my boss. Nemu seemed to know him personally, saying that she would stop there once in a while to refuel her scooter. I then told them about the Haibane boy I had met named Hyoko. They all seemed to know him well, especially Rakka. They told me about Abandoned Factory, and about the Haibane that lived there. They also told me that most of the Young Feathers that lived here were born in Abandoned Factory.

"Why are they over here?" I asked.

"Well, they admitted that they know nothing about raising children," Nemu said, "A while ago, a woman named Kuramori found out about the children over there and volunteered to take care of them, seeing as how most of the Haibane at Abandoned Factory are immature and always like to play around."

"So, how come I've never met this Kuramori?"

"Hmm..." Nemu started, "Well..."

She then explained to me the concept of "The Day Of Flight". I pondered about this for a moment.

_ "Would I have to go through a Day of Flight?" _ I wondered.

"Where do you go after the Day of Flight?"

"We don't know." Rakka said, "That's one of the many mysteries of Guri."

"Many mysteries?" I asked. They then began to tell me about the walls that surrounded the town, saying that nobody was allowed to exit, and that no one except for the Tooga were allowed to enter.

_ "The Tooga?" _ I wondered, _ "The same people who gave me my pistol?" _

After dinner, we went to the guestroom where tea and cookies were served. The soft glow of the lamp in the corner of the room gave the area enough light for me to see everyone's faces. The yellowish glow of the lamp on the table felt as if we were around a campfire. I felt at ease talking to the girls. It was during this time that I was asked what the Haibane Renmei wanted to see me for.

"Eh?" I said, "Well, Only the Communicator wanted to see me." I sipped my tea, "He said the Tooga wanted to give me a gift."

"What?" The girls spat out their tea, "The Tooga gave you something?"

"Uh... not personally," I said, "The Communicator delivered it to me."

"What is it?" Kana asked.

"Well..." I unbuttoned my shirt and pulled out my pistol, laying it on the table, "This."

"Wow..." Nemu said, "I've read about guns before, but I've never actually seen one in real life." She carefully picked it up, and examined it, "Oh, this is a revolver... and the bullets are pretty big too." She removed a bullet from one of the chambers.

"Why would the Tooga want you to have a gun?" Rakka asked, "You're not going to use it are you?"

"I don't know..." I said, "The Communicator told me to follow the Tooga's orders, so maybe they know something that I

don't..."

"Careful with that!" Nemu shouted at Kana, who was looking straight down the barrel, "It could go off at any minute!"

"Fine..." Kana said, putting down the gun.

"Well, you're really lucky to get a gift from the Tooga." Hikari said, "For as long as I've been here, they never gave anything away. And they never really want to talk to anyone else besides the Communicator. And even then they don't actually talk."

"Huh? What do you mean?" I asked

"Well, they don't talk." Hikari said, "They use a form of sign language, using only their hands to make deals."

"Oh. Why don't they want to talk?"

"Again that's one of the mysteries of Guri..." Nemu said, handing the gun back to me. "Well, it's getting late. I'll see you all tomorrow." She yawned as she exited.

"Yeah, we should go to." Kana said, pulling Hikari outside, "G'night, Rakka. You too Roku."

"Heheh, 'night..." Hikari said.

I waved them goodbye. Yawning, I started cleaning the table.

"You can have the guestroom," Rakka said, "If you don't mind that everyone uses it as well. It's like a meeting place for everyone to come to."

"Heh," I chuckled as I put the dishes in the sink, "As long as you all knock before entering." I rubbed my hair, "A boy needs his privacy once in a while."

"Heheh," Rakka laughed, "Goodnight, Roku"

"'Night." I replied. She waved, and left me alone in the room. I took off my shirt and pants, hanging it on the post of the bed. As I walked over to turn off the floor lamp, I noticed an object standing against the wall near the kitchen. I backed up a bit and realized that it was a mirror.

I stood in front of the mirror, examining the holster strapped to my chest. Feeling playful, I quickly drew the gun from its place and pointed at my reflection. I felt stupid when I realized that I was wearing nothing but a long-sleeve and boxers.

"Bang..." I thought to myself, mouthing the word.

I replaced the gun, and drew it again, getting a little faster every time. I did this for a while, not realizing how much time had passed by. Curious, I check the clock, which read "One thirty-two".

"Better get some sleep..."

Finally feeling tired, I un-strapped the holster and hung it on top of my shirt. I fell on the bed, exhausted. As soon as my head hit the pillow, I was fast asleep.

I awoke to the sounds of screaming in the distance. My surroundings were pitch-black; I couldn't even see my hand in front of me. Getting up from the bed, I felt that the ground was unstable; it was as soft as a pillow stacked on top of more pillows. I looked down, wondering what I was stepping on, but saw nothing.

_ "What the hell?" _I thought, _ "Power outage?" _

I squinted my eyes, hoping I would be able to get used to the darkness. Slowly an image appeared before be. A girl, about my age, was facing me. She wore white pajamas and a tank top, carrying a small plush dog in her arms. Her light brown hair looked as though it were waving in a gentle breeze, though I could feel none.

"Why are you doing this?" She asked.

"Eh?" I responded, "What are you talk-"

"I try and try to provide for you, and this is how you repay me?" I heard myself say.

_ "What the?" _ I turned around, and to my surprise, I saw an image of myself.

My image walked over to the girl, reached back with his left hand, and slapped her across the face.

"Next time I tell you to stay home, you do it!" he said.

"But..." The girl said, holding her face, "Brother...I ... saw you... I wanted to stop you..."

"You know what'll happen if Rob finds out about this..." He drew closer to the girl, putting his left hand on her shoulder.

"Please... no..." She closed her eyes, "You'll protect me... right?"

"I took an oath..." He said, "You know I can't..." He suddenly grabbed her throat.

"No..." She choked out. She began struggling, though it was in vain. He was clearly stronger than her.

"This is what you get for butting in!" He said as they both fell to the floor. He still had her throat in his hand. I could clearly see that his grip was getting tighter every time she tried to take a breath.

***"I wish you were never born with me! Burn in hell you fuckin' bitch!" **He shouted in her face. After a few moments of struggling, the girl's body lay limp on the floor. I then saw him stand on her body, checking the clock on the wall. It read "Six o'clock". He fell to the floor, face first and began sobbing.

"Why!" he screamed, "Why goddamn you!"

I saw him struggle to force himself up. He then looked right into my eyes. Slowly, he reached into his pocket, pulling out a revolver. He pulled on the hammer with his thumb, pointed the gun to his forehead, and squeezed the trigger.

"NO!" I screamed as I fell off the bed. I looked around and saw that I was back in my room.

_ "A dream?" _ I thought to myself.

I slowly got up and sat at the edge of the bed. Rubbing my forehead, I checked the clock on the nightstand.

_ "Seven o' four..." _ I said to myself.

I sat there for a moment, analyzing what had just happened in my dream. I tried thinking harder, but nothing still made sense. Was this my past? What did that girl see? Who is this "Rob" that "I" spoke of?

I sat there, staring at the floor for a few minutes when there was a knock on the door.

"Roku." I recognized Hikari's voice, "Breakfast's ready."

"I'll be down in a minute." I called back. I heard her footsteps fade as she walked away. Sighing to myself, I put on the holster and the Gun that hung at the corner of the bed. I then dressed myself, putting on my pants and shirt. I went into the washroom, and groomed myself with a brush that I found. Satisfied with my appearance, I quickly headed for the dining room.

(PC)...

As the girls prepared to serve breakfast, Roku briskly walked into the dining room with a look of thought pasted on his face. He quietly sat at his chair, and poured himself a cup of hot tea.

"Morning, Roku." Nemu said as she passed by, sitting at her chair, "Did you sleep well?"

"Yeah." Roku said, rubbing his eyes.

"Doesn't look like it," Kana said as she jumped onto her seat, "You sure you had a good night's rest?"

"Yeah... I just..." Roku trailed off.

"What?" Nemu asked, passing a plate of toast to Hikari.

"Do you know a place where they sell cigarettes?" He asked, smiling.

"Cigarettes?" Rakka asked, "I think they sell some at the trading post near the clock tower..."

"Yeah. They sell cigs there." Kana confirmed, "You smoke?"

"Yeah." Roku said, blushing. He checked the clock on the wall. It read "Seven twenty-seven". He sighed, "Well, I guess I gotta cut breakfast short. I'm already late for my first day of work..."

"Hm?" Rakka started, "Oh! You can use Reki's scooter!" She stood up and retrieved a set of keys that hung by the clock. "I'm sure she wouldn't mind."

"Reki?" Roku asked, "That girl you were talking about yesterday? Where is she?"

"Oh..." Hikari started, "She had her 'Day of Flight' a few months before you were born, so she's already gone."

"Oh, I see..." He stuffed his mouth with a couple slices of toast, "Nghill chee oo rata den."

"Eh?" The girls all asked at the same time.

Roku quickly washed the toast down his throat with a glass of water. "I said 'I'll see you later'." He waved at the girls, taking the keys and exiting the room.

"Roku wait!" Rakka called out to him. Roku re-entered the room, wondering what she wanted. She ran into the kitchen for a moment, returning with a small paper sack. She handed it to him. "You're lunch."

"Thanks." Roku said, exiting the room once again.

Outside, Roku saw a pair of scooters resting on a wall next to the nametags. He found the scooter that matched the keys he was holding, and boarded it. Revving the engine a little bit, he slowly exited Old Home, making sure to turn his nametag around.

In the matter of a few minutes, he was at the garage. He noticed a sign that hung above the door. It read "Pop's Garage". He also noticed the surrounding area. There was a huge fountain that was built in the middle of a plaza. The shops surrounding the fountain were barely opening. People everywhere were smiling as they went about their daily routine.

The garage itself was located at the corner of one long building that stretched the entire street one way, and the other. Just in front of the building were two fuel pumps, with two nozzles each. In front of the pumps were two garage doors, one at each side of the store. The windows next to the doors showed the inside of the store. Peering through, he spotted Hyouko along with two other boys. One of them seemed older than Roku and the other much younger.

"Oh!" Hyouko said, pointing at Roku, "There he is. Come on in, Roku."

Roku entered the store area of the garage and was greeted by the older looking man.

"Hi there." The man said extending his hand. "Nice to meet you!" Roku shook his hand, noticing that the man was wearing a chef's outfit.

"His name's 'Dante', " Hyouko said, "And the boy there is 'Naota'. They're both Gordon's sons."

The little boy walked to Roku and extended his hand. "Nice to meet you." He said shyly.

"Likewise." Roku said to them both. "You two work here too?"

"Oh, no." Dante said, "I don't care too much for machines. I work at the bakery north of here. Hyouko says that one of your friends works there as well."

"Friends?" Roku said, "You mean Hikari?"

"Ah, haha..." Dante chuckled and blushed at the same time, "Yeah..."

"He likes her." Naota said aloud. "Don't you?"

"Shut up, brat!" Dante shouted, hitting Naota's head, "I told you not to tell anyone!"

"Uh..." Roku whispered.

"Well." Dante said, "I gotta go to work. Tell mom I'll be back for lunch." He waved goodbye as he exited the store.

"Hey Naota." Hyouko said, "Show Roku where the lockers are. And give him his uniform."

"Okay. Follow me, Roku." Naota cheerfully lead Roku to the back of the store, passing through a door, and into a hallway. After a few steps to the left, Naota opened a door, showing Roku into the locker-room. Inside, wooden lockers were standing against the wall. On the door of each locker hung a nametag. Roku quickly found Gordon's, Hyouko's and Naota's.

"Your locker's over there." Naota said, pointing to the locker at the end of the room where his nametag hung. It was next to Naota's. "You can find some clothes that fit over there." He pointed to a box of gray shirts. Next to it was a box of navy blue overalls. Roku began digging through the boxes, finding a shirt and overalls that fit him. The shirt had the logo "Pop's Garage" stitched the left breast, while the pants had the same logo stitched on the calf of the right leg.

"You work here?" Roku asked as he began changing into the uniform.

"Yeah." Naota said as he put on his gray shirt. "I love machines."

"Yeah?" Roku responded as he slipped on his overalls.

"Yeah." Naota answered, "I'm building this bike with a powerful engine that my dad got recently. He said that the Tooga had traded it into town and that he bought it as soon as it was available to purchase."

"What kind of engine?" Roku asked, straightening out his uniform.

"I don't know..." Naota trailed off, "But it looks like it was made for a bike, because a bike chassis fits perfectly around it. We tried it with a regular bike, but it was too weak and the engine split the chassis into two. So my dad an' I are building a bike from scratch. One that can withstand the engine's power."

"That's cool." Roku said, playing around with his hair, trying to tie it into a ponytail.

"There's a box full of beanies over there if you're worried about your hair." He pointed to a box that was on top of Roku's locker.

"Thanks." Roku said as he reached up and took the box down. Inside he found hundreds of beanies, skullcaps and hats of every shape size and color. "You sure, your dad won't mind?" Naota shook his head.

Like a kid in a candy store, Roku began sifting through the box, finding two beanies to his liking. One was the same shade of gray that matched his shirt uniform. The other was a deep black, which he tossed into his locker with the rest of his clothes.

"Come on," Naota said, signaling for Roku to follow him, "Let's help Hyouko open up shop."

Roku obediently followed, putting on the gray beanie that he had just found, tucking his hair underneath. He made sure that his halo was free to float above his head. Inside the store, Hyouko was already dealing with an elderly customer. Naota grabbed a broom and began sweeping the floors.

"Roku, could you open up the garage doors?" Naota asked, tossing him a set of keys from his belt.

"Uh... sure." Roku said as he caught the keys in midair.

Outside, he found that the garage doors were locked using a set of sturdy looking padlocks at each end. He took a bit of time searching for the right keys, also taking the time to memorize which key opened which lock. After all four locks were opened; he pulled on the handle in the middle of the garage door and lifted it up, sliding it toward the ceiling. After he did the same to the other door, he took a broom from the corner and began sweeping the area. After he was almost finished, he noticed an object in the corner of the garage. It was covered with a blue tarp, so he couldn't see what was underneath, but he noticed the outline of a bike.

"Ha!" a familiar voice said, "I knew I made the right choice!" It was Gordon, standing by the workbench.

"Wha?" Roku said, spinning around, "When did you come in, sir?"

"Ha! Formal too." Gordon smiled widely, "You don't have to call me 'sir', boy. 'Master' or 'Your Holiness' is good enough."

"Gordon!" Magdalene scolded him from inside the shop, "Be nice to him!"

"Okay..." Gordon walked over to Roku, putting his gigantic hands on Roku's shoulder, "Just call me 'Pops'... but only because Maggie says so."

"'Pops'?" Roku questioned, "As in 'Pop's Garage'?"

"Well who in the hell you though was 'Pops' of 'Pop's Garage'?"

"Uh... well..."

"Never mind, kid." Gordon took a pack of cigarettes from his pocket and placed one in his mouth, "Mr. Satoshi from the book Repair shop dropped his scooter off last night." He lit his cigarette. "He was complaining that it wasn't running correctly. He said that he felt it struggling to run and that the engine was sputtering." He sucked on the cigarette, blowing out the smoke through his nostrils. "See if you can find out what's wrong and then fix it."

"Sure thing, Pops." Roku said enthusiastically.

"Oh, lemmie see your Haibane notebook." Roku pulled it out of his back pocket and handed it to him. He opened it up and wrote inside, closing it and handing it back to me when he was done. "Just a little advance."

"Thanks!" Roku bowed.

"Aww." Pops said, "I just thought you could use a little advance, that's all. Now get to work before I take it back!"

Quickly, Roku ran out to the front and retrieved the scooter to be repaired. As soon as Roku wheeled the scooter into the shop, everyone seemed to get into their daily routine. Hyouko began working on the small vehicle that he was repairing yesterday, Pops went inside to tend the shop, Maggie took her scooter out and rode off into the distance, and Naota took the blue tarp off of the object in the corner, confirming Roku's beliefs that it was a bike. He wheeled it next to Roku, putting it on a small lift, elevating it so that he could work on the engine that was located inside the chassis of the bike.

"So is that the bike you're working on?" Roku asked as he took off the cover of the engine compartment on the scooter he was working on.

"Yeah." Naota said, "It's great, isn't it?"

"It is." Roku said, noticing that it was bigger than any other bike that he'd seen while in Glie. He also noticed that something was bothering Naota, there was a look of concern on the little boy's face.

"What's wrong?" Roku asked.

"Eh?" Naota looked as though he'd seen a ghost. "N-nothing! Why?"

Roku studied his face a little closer. "No... there's definitely something wrong. What is it?" Roku asked again.

"Nothing!" Naota shouted.

"Keep it down in there!" Pops yelled from inside.

Roku shrugged and continued working on the scooter, but he couldn't help but notice Naota's look of concern. It was like Roku was able to read his mind. Finally, after a few moments of silence, Roku spoke.

"It's about you're brother, isn't it?" Roku said.

"W-wha...?" Naota was shocked, "How... what?"

"I could tell." Roku said, "He's doing something, but I can't quite put my finger on it..."

"Well... I..." Naota stuttered.

"Never mind." Roku said, "Forget it, it's probably nothing anyways."

Naota nodded his head and went back to work; still surprised that Roku was able to read his mind.

(PC)...

"All right!" Pops yelled from inside the store, "Lunch time! Be back here by One o'clock! Got that!"

"Yes..." Hyouko groaned. He then turned to me, "Come on, let's go and get some grub."

"Actually..." I said, "Rakka packed me a lunch." I took the sack out of the storage basket from my scooter. I looked inside and saw that she had prepared me a lunch of roast beef sandwiches.

"Whoa!" Hyouko said, "The girls made you lunch? I have to buy my lunch from a caf  everyday!"

"Really? Aren't there girls at Abandoned Factory?" I asked.

"Yeah." Hyouko grumbled as we began walking toward a caf  across the plaza, "But they're really not good at cooking; hell, they're almost never home most of the time. Though there is one guy that's excellent at making a pot of rice."

I laughed, though I almost felt sorry for him. Not being able to rely on somebody else for help. I wondered if anything would have been different, had I been born at Abandoned Factory instead of Old Home.

Reaching the caf , I found a seat located outside under the sun. Hyouko went in and ordered his meal, while I unwrapped one of the many sandwiches that Rakka had packed for me. As I began eating, I heard a familiar voice call out to me.

"Hey! There you are!" Dante yelled, waving his arm, "Mind if I eat lunch with you guys?" He placed a basket on the table.

"Not at all." I said. Hyouko came back with his meal of pasta and bread, and sat across the table from me. Dante sat to my left. He began placing food on that table, making it seem as if the basket had no bottom.

I decided to make small talk. "Uh... you know where I could buy some cigarettes around here?" I asked.

"Hm?" Hyouko started, "You smoke?"

"Yeah." I responded, blushing a little.

"Well, you could go to the tobacco store over there." Dante said with a chuckle, pointing behind me. I turned around and saw that there was a tobacco shop. My face turned red; how could I have missed it?

"Uh... heh... thanks." I finished my first sandwich.

"Um..." Dante started, "Did Hikari make those?"

"I dunno." I said as I took a bite of my sandwich, "Probably."

Dante began to blush, "You mind if I try some?"

"Uh... no... here..." I ripped a portion of the sandwich and handed it to Dante. He sniffed it a bit, and then placed the entire portion into his mouth, seeming to enjoy every single bite.

"That's definitely Hikari's doing." He said, lost in thought.

"Uh..." I started, "You like her?"

"What's not to like?" He shouted, "She beautiful! The way she wears her hair! Her smile! The way she seems so innocent!" He went on and on until Hyouko interrupted.

"You do know that she's a Haibane, right?" He sipped on a glass of water, "The Haibane Renmei forbids us to have relations with humans, and vice versa."

"Really?" I asked, finishing my lunch. "I never knew that."

"I don't care! I'm gonna marry her!" Dante balled his hand into a fist, "Then we'll get outta this town and live somewhere else!"

I thought about this while Dante was going on about how he'd have many children with Hikari. Somehow, just like with Naota, I could read his mind. I knew all of his thoughts in the blink of an eye.

"Whoa, dude!" I shouted, "You have pictures of her in you're room?"

Dante spun around and glared at me. "Who told you that?" Hyouko began snickering, "It was the brat wasn't it?"

"No, man." I tried to calm him down, "I could tell."

"He told you didn't he?"

"Dude," Hyouko butted in, "I was with both of them all morning, and Naota didn't say anything."

"... Ah-hahaha!" Dante laughed nervously, "That was a good one, Roku!" He began laughing louder and louder. "I thought you had really read my mind!"

"I did." I defended myself, "I don't know how, but I read your mind like a book."

"Yeah, right." Hyouko said, "If you could read minds, tell me what I'm thinking right now."

Sighing, I studied Hyouko's face, trying to analyze what he was thinking.

"I dunno..." I said, "I couldn't get anything..."

"Ah, it was just luck." Hyouko said, leaning back into his chair. "I knew it all along."

"I guess..." I said as I stood up. "I'm gonna go and buy some smokes."

"Alright." Dante said, continuing his lunch.

I began thinking to myself as I walked to the tobacco shop. How was I able to read their minds? I decided that I needed another test. I entered the tobacco shop, looking around for anybody to test my theory.

"Welcome." A man behind the counter said. I decided that he would be the perfect test subject. I walked to him and began staring at his face, analyzing anything that I could get.

"Uh... can I help you?" He nervously asked. I ignored him and continued staring into his eyes.

"Look, if you want something just ask, don't try to send it to me telepathically..." He started getting nervous. Still certain that I could read his mind I continued staring at him.

"Alright!" He shouted, "That's enough! Either buy something or get out!"

"Dammit!" I thought, "It didn't work this time..." I sighed to myself and ordered. "Uh... sorry... I was just nervous... lemme get a pack of the non-filtered and that Zippo over there." I pointed to a Zippo lighter that was dull silver. As he brought the items to me, I wrote down the price on a page of the notebook and tore it out, handing it to the shopkeeper. Bowing, and apologizing for my weirdness, I left the store and headed back to where Hyouko and Dante were sitting. I opened the pack of cigarettes and put one into my mouth. Suddenly I remembered something that I used to do before. It came to me the instant I took out the lighter I just bought.

"You guys ever see somebody light a lighter like this?" I asked them as I sat at the table. I held the lighter upside down. Quickly, I

snapped my finger. The lighter ended up in between my thumb and index finger, only now it was right side up, open and lit.

"Sweet." Dante said, chewing his food.

"Hey!" Hyouko said, "Teach me how to do that!"

"You smoke too?" I asked.

"No, but that would be cool to show off!" Hyouko laughed.

"Alright." I began the lesson describing several ways to light the lighter.

**later that same day.*_

After lunch, the three of us returned to work, with Dante heading back to the bakery and Hyouko and I heading back to Pop's Garage. Immediately, the both of us went straight to work; I went back to the scooter and Hyouko went back to the small vehicle. About an hour later, Hyouko announced to Pops that the vehicle was repaired, and that he needed somebody to go with him to the sheep farm that it belonged to. Pops volunteered, saying that he needed to receive the payment personally, and that he needed to drive the truck since Hyouko didn't have a license. Naota also volunteered to go, leaving me alone to tend the shop.

"If you see anyone in the shop," Pops said, "Just stop what you're doing and help them find what they need. If we don't come back by six, close up shop." He tossed me a set of keys. "Those are yours now. They open the shop, garage doors and your locker"

"Uh... thanks."

"Later, Roku!" Naota said, waving from the back of the truck.

"Take care man." Hyouko shouted back as well.

I hooked the keys onto one of the belt loops on my pants and went back to work. After only a few moments to myself, scooter pulled up to the fuel pumps outside the garage.

"Hey, Roku." I recognized Nemu's voice, "Could you fill up my scooter?"

I looked up from what I was working on. "Uh... sure." I stood up and walked over to her. "You come here all the time?"

"Nah." She sat on a bench near the store entrance, "Usually I would go down to the east district because the gas is a little cheaper, but my scooter was running on fumes, so..."

"Ah..." I said as I began re-fueling her scooter, "I see."

She sat there quietly as I checked her scooter's oil and other essential fluid levels. She looked up at the sky, sighing deeply as she did so. As I worked, I couldn't help but notice a look of concern on her face.

"What's wrong?" I asked, finished re-fueling her scooter.

"Hm?" She began, "Oh, nothing." I could easily tell that she was avoiding something.

"No, there's something wrong," I wiped my hand on a rag, "I can tell." I sat next to her. She blushed, and scooted away from me a little.

"It's nothing." She insisted.

I studied her face closely, trying to see if my "mind reading" ability would work again.

"Stop staring at me!" She chuckled, gently pushing me away.

"Why do you feel that way?" I asked in a serious tone.

"Wha? Feel what way? What are you talking about?" She got up and took out her Haibane notebook, writing the amount of money that she owed and handed me the paper slip. She then quickly walked to the scooter and sat on it.

"Wait." I said sternly, grabbing hold of her arm. "There's something on your mind."

"What are you a mind reader?" She snapped back.

"... You feel like nobody cares for you." I said calmly.

"What? You're crazy!" She started her scooter, but I immediately stood in her way.

"Tell me." I said, "I know you feel this way. You feel useless because you're not able to help anyone, but at the same time you feel as though nobody wants to help you."

She turned off her scooter. "How do you..."

"I can just tell." I said. I began searching my mind for another reason, but I couldn't; it was just like the time with Naota and Dante. I could just tell that something was running through her mind.

"Am I right?" I asked her.

She sat there quietly. I walked over to her and rubbed her shoulder, ensuring her that I wasn't there to hurt her feelings.

"Am I right?" I asked her again.

"Yes." She said softly. "Before Rakka, Hirkai, Kana, and Kuu, another girl who had her 'Day of Flight' before you came; it was just Reki, Kuramori, the young feathers and I. I was able to do something around the house to help out. And Kuramori was there to help me out. But, then Kuramori disappeared and Reki changed. She started doing all the household chores; taking care of the little ones. She kept telling me that she was able to handle it all by herself, but I still wanted to help around the house. I tried to help out, but Reki would shout at me, saying that it was her responsibility. Then, Hikari was born, and I thought to myself that I finally had somebody to take care of. But

there went Reki again, taking responsibility. She also did this with Kana, Kuu and then Rakka." She wiped her eyes, "I got lazy."

"You were jealous?" I asked.

"No, I was never jealous of Reki. I dunno..." She sighed, "I just feel that... I'm sorta the odd one out, you know? Like, I'm just here, and nothing else. I try to do some chores, but either Rakka or Hikari helps me out, ending up taking the entire chore out of my hands. Even Kana does it once in a while. I usually let that pass though, and end up taking a nap. But when I need help, everyone's busy. Rakka's always busy, with work and with the Young Feathers. Hirkai usually cleans up the house and starts the meals, and Kana always works on the clock tower at Old Home. It's like I'm still four years old, when I'm actually older than everyone else..."

I thought about what she said. She laughed to herself, and started her scooter again.

"I dunno why I just told you all that." She chuckled again, "It was like I was talking to the Communicator."

"Maybe you should tell people that you don't need help with everything." I advised her, "We're all friends; so you shouldn't worry about hurting anyone's feelings. You should just tell them that you want to do something yourself. Don't just let them take over." I smiled, "Goddammit, you're the eldest! You should start taking responsibility and tell everyone to sit back and relax!"

We both laughed for a second. Taking a deep breath, Nemu spoke.

"Thanks, Roku. Maybe you should start giving out advice more often. I feel better now, after talking to you."

"No prob." I said. "It was like I read you're mind though, so it was easy."

"Oh?" She said, "You're a mind reader?"

"No, I could just tell..." I said. "I'll see you later then."

"Yeah." She said as she rode away, "Later."

As I finished up fixing the scooter, I thought about what had just happened today. I knew deep down that I had read Naota, Dante, and Nemu's minds like a book. But for some reason, I couldn't do the same with Hyouko and the tobacco dealer. Each time I did, though, their problems appeared in my head, as clear as if I were imagining something. I didn't know why I was able to do this, but I would have to talk with the Communicator about this, the next time he called for me.

I took out my cigarettes and placed one in my mouth. Putting it back into my pocket, I took out my new lighter and lit my cigarette. Suddenly the blood from my head rushed down to my feet. The words "New" and "Lighter" repeated itself in my mind. Slowly, I looked at the lighter in my hand.

"OH SHIT!" I yelled, quickly getting up and running toward the tobacco store, "I WASN'T SUPPOSED TO BUY THIS!"

**end chapter four**

* * *

>disclaimer: with the exception of Roku, Gordon, Magdalene, Naota and the names "Horton" for the old clothes dealer, and "Dante" for the assistant baker, I do not own any characters that have made an appearance in the story. I did this for fun, not for money. If you own these characters, please don't sue me. Please don't ruin my fun. Also, this story is only allowed to appear on If you wish to paste this onto your site, please ask permission first and give credit where credit's due.

5. just me and the boys

Note: This chapter contains questionable content. For safety reasons, this chapter gets an "R" rating.

Sorry if this chapter seems a little rushed. I'll edit it when I can.

* * *

>chapter five: just me and the boys_

As the days passed, Hyouko, Dante, and I quickly became the best of friends. Even though we had almost nothing in common, we were able to put that aside and easily identify with each other. Everyday we would eat lunch together at the same table at CafÃ© Kartie and talk about what guys would usually talk about: clothes, shoes, music, and girls, though usually it would end up with Dante talking on and on about Hikari.

Sitting at Cafe Kartie one Friday afternoon, Hyouko and I stared at a trio of girls passing us by.

"Mmm." I started, "Look at that."

"Eh?" Dante looked toward the girls. "Meh. Not my type."

"Lemmie guess," Hyouko said, "They don't have the light blonde hair tied into a ponytail? They aren't wearing wired rimmed glasses? They don't have wings or a halo? They aren't wearing a miniskirt?" Hyouko and I laughed out loud. "Goddammit, you're into almost every single fetish in the book!"

I placed a cigarette into my mouth and took out my lighter. As I lit my cigarette, I faced Dante and eyed him.

"You know..." I drew in a breath of smoke and exhaled through my nostrils, "The Communicator wants to see me today. Maybe I should tell him about your obsession with Hiakri."

"No!" He jumped from his seat, "And it's not an obsession! It's Love." He embraced himself tightly.

"Calm down." I said tapping the ash of my cigarette onto the ground, "I was just joking. And it's only love if she likes you too."

"She does like me!" Dante sat back down. "You'll see."

"Man, you need to be exposed to other chicks." Hyouko said, sipping on a glass of ice water, "We should go out tonight. Maybe then you'll stop badgering Hikari."

"I'm not badgering her..." Dante whispered, "Both of you are stupid..."

"Out?" I asked, ignoring Dante's remarks, "Out to where?"

"Drinking." Hyouko said, picking his teeth with a toothpick, "Bar-hopping, man. You know, relieve some stress. It's Friday, we're young, and we should have some fun."

"You think they'll let me? I mean, don't you think I'm a little underage?"

"You're a Haibane." Dante said, biting into a piece of meat. "They don't have age limits for Haibane for some reason."

"Oh." I said, "Then we should go out!..." I paused for a moment, remembering something important, "After I go talk with the communicator. He wanted to see me today." I said softly.

"Aww, why even bother? Can't you just ditch the old man?" Dante asked. We both stared at him like he was crazy. "What?" He snorted.

"Disobeying the Communicator is like signing your own death wish. You mess with him and he'll rip your wings off..." Hyouko said softly.

"He can't rip our wings off," I said, blowing smoke into his face. "That's impossible."

"Oh yeah?" He retorted, fanning the smoke away with his hands, "Then what about Tama?"

"Who?" I asked.

"Tama. She was this girl who lived with us over at Abandoned Factory, about a year ago. On her first day after she was born, the Communicator called for her. She didn't go though, because she was stubborn. The next day, we saw her running around in the Western Woods, only this time; she didn't have her halo or her wings. The Communicator yelled at us for trying to help her, saying that she had failed her trial. I heard that she died because she had lost a lot of blood."

"Bullshit." I said, smothering the remains of my cigarette on the table, "You're lying."

"Bullshit?" Hyouko, sat up, "Go and ask the Communicator about it. Then you'll see who's bullshitting."

Dante checked his watch, "Well, time to get back to work and-"

"And feel up Hikari's shirt." Hyouko interrupted, smiling to himself.

"Bastard!" Dante yelled back, "I would never do that!"

"I wouldn't be surprised if you did..." I said, getting up from my chair.

"We'll see you back at your place, after Roku gets done flirting with the Communicator," Hyouko said, earning a glare from me. "Tonight, we get wasted!" He swallowed the rest of his water in one gulp.

Cheerfully, he and I went back to Pop's Garage and continued repairing several small machines. As closing time came, Hyouko and I headed to the locker room to change. As I sat down to remove my shoes, Hyouko started a conversation.

"You think he's really gonna do it?" Hyouko asked as he removed his shirt.

"Who's gonna do what?" I asked, removing my work boots.

"Dante." He said, digging through his locker, "I mean, you think he'll be able to get at Hikari? You know, hook up with her?"

"Nah." I said, wrapping my holster around myself, deciding that it was too hot to put on my long-sleeve, "He's smarter than that. He knows it's forbidden."

"Yeah, but he's too damn persistent." He put on his red sweater.

"Man, Dante knows what's right and wrong."

"But, for as long as I've worked here, he's always been talking about Hikari. You think if Hikari puts him down, that he'll, you know... freak?"

"What?" I stopped buttoning my shirt and looked over at him.

"You know..." Hyouko put his hat over his halo. "... go berserk?"

"Dante's smarter than that." I repeated. I wanted change the subject, "So where am I gonna meet you after I'm done with the Communicator?"

"I'll meet you at the edge of the Western Woods, near the Hill of Winds." Hyouko said, retrieving his skateboard from his locker. Outside the shop, I took my scooter over to one of the gas pumps. Once refueled, Hyouko and I went our separate ways.

*at the temple entrance.*

As I neared the temple, A Renmei member ordered me to halt by holding his hand up. I complied and walked over to him. He then placed oddly colored bells on my wings and my wrist. I looked at the bells on my

wings, noticing that instead of the brown leather and cloth pieces that were given to me last time, these bells were held together with what looked like silver chain mail. He then opened the temple doors and led me inside. As I followed him in, I saw another Renmei caretaker picking fruit off a tree. The instant he saw me, he fell to his knees and bowed several times.

"What's this all about?" I wanted to ask, but caught the words trying to escape my mouth. Instead, I headed further into the temple. I walked over to the gazebo where I last saw the Communicator. Lo and behold, he was sitting there, looking at me as I sat next to him.

"Tell me about the past few days." He said.

"Okay," I started, "But first tell me why I'm wearing these shiny bells. How come they aren't leather like last time?"

"You will learn soon enough." He stated, "Now tell me about the past few days."

I looked at him; his body language..."spoke" to me... saying to me that he was hiding something very important from me, though I couldn't figure out what it was.

"Okay," I finally agreed. I then told him about how I was getting used to my new life in Glie. I told him about Dante, Hyouko, Naota, Pops, and Maggie, and how they were all nice to me. I told him how I was a good Haibane and tried to return a lighter that I had thought was new, but found out that it was the tobacco store's test model, so it was actually used. After my little speech, I hesitated a little bit; I didn't want to tell him about my little "mind reading" ability.

"Anything else?" He asked. "Tell me everything and anything strange that has happened."

"Well..." I said, scratching my head, "Actually... When I was talking to Naota and Nemu, I felt that I could read their minds like a book. It was like I knew every problem they had, but no matter how much I wanted to solve it for them, I couldn't. So I just gave them a bit of advice to help them out."

"Hmm. Interesting" He said, getting up from his seat. "Were you able to control this... 'mind reading'?"

"No, actually it just happened. I even tried to read the clerk's mind at the tobacco store. I just came off as a weirdo though..."

"I see." He walked to the end of the gazebo, "How does your left shoulder feel?"

"Huh? Well, the wound is almost completely healed." I said rubbing my shoulder, "There's only a little scab left. I didn't think it would heal this fast though. I thought it would have taken a lot longer than this."

I was surprised at my casual answer. Normally, when asked about my arm by a peer, I would just shrug it off and change the subject.

"It should have." I heard the Communicator whisper. "This... is like..." He trailed off.

"This is like what?" I asked him. Just then I saw Rakka walking by. "Rakka?"

She looked in my direction and smiled, knowing that she couldn't talk in the presence of the Communicator. She waved "hi" and then continued walking toward what seemed to be a door at the end of the forest. I wondered where she was headed.

"She is going to retrieve gold flakes used for making halos." The Communicator said.

"How did you-?" The Communicator interrupted me before I could finish asking my question.

"That is all for today. I will call you for our next meeting." He started to walk away.

"Wait!" I called, remembering what Hyouko said about the girl named Tama. "Is it true that you rip the wings off of Haibane that disobey you?"

He stopped in his tracks. I could feel the tension thicken with every passing second.

After a short pause, he turned to me and said, "Those who have failed their trials are not allowed to go over the walls. Their halos will be the first to fall. Then, eventually, their wings become useless, and is absorbed back into their bodies."

"Trials? What trials?"

"You will see in time." He quickly escaped into the thick forest, leaving me alone in the gazebo, more confused than before.

Angry that he just left all of a sudden, I stormed out of the temple. Outside, the Renmei member that placed the silver bells on my wings retrieved them and placed them into his cloak. He then kneeled to the floor, and bowed several times to me. This left me completely lost as to what was going on. I walked over to my scooter and opened the throttle all the way, making several donuts on the ground before riding off to the main road. I was pissed, and I wanted the Communicator to know it.

at the bridge to town.

As the small stone bridge leading to town came into my view, I slowed the scooter down to a reasonable speed. I spotted Kana walking across the bridge, carrying several bags full of groceries.

"Hey, Kana." I greeted, pulling up next to her.

"Hey, yourself." She said, dropping the bags onto the ground.

"You need help?" I asked.

"Yeah, lemmie borrow your scooter." She giggled.

"Okay." I said, getting off and rolling it over to her. She had a look of shock on her face. "What?" I asked.

"Uh... really?" She blinked a few times, "You'll let me ride it back home?"

"Sure. Why not?" I said; putting the groceries onto the rack located behind the driver's seat.

"Thank you." She said. "Reki almost never let me ride her scooter before. And don't get me started on Nemu..." I noticed her blush a little.

"Well, I need to walk a little anyways." I said, looking towards the Western Woods.

"Where are you going?" She asked as she sat on the scooter.

"Goodbye." I said, ignoring her question. I walked toward the western woods, lost in my own thoughts.

"Uh..." Kana started, "Roku, wait!" She called out to me.

"Don't worry about me." I said, not turning around to face her, "Later."

I ran towards the woods, remembering that I was supposed to meet Hyouko there. Hopefully he wasn't waiting too long.

*later that evening*

I had found Hyouko sitting under a tree, near the edge of the Western Woods, exactly where he said he would wait for me. He was wearing a Black sweater, black jeans, white sneakers and a white cap, which hid his halo.

When I asked him why he wanted me to meet him here, he said that he had a little thinking to do. Passing it off as none of my business, I suggested that we head back to town and meet Dante. We agreed and off we went to Pop's Garage.

When we arrived, Dante was there already waiting for us. He was wearing black jeans, a black turtle neck shirt, and white shoes. I noticed that only I was wearing my usual clothes.

"What the hell?" I asked them, "Why didn't you tell me I was supposed to change and match with you guys?"

"We're going out." Hyouko said, "That implies that we dress to impress the girlies. And right now, black and white is in."

"Hmph..." I grumbled, "Let's stop by the thrift store real quick. I don't wanna feel left out."

"Fine." Dante and Hyouko said together. As we headed toward the thrift store, I put a cigarette into my mouth and lit it the fancy way: by first holding it upside down in my fingers and snapping. The lighter wound up in between my thumb and index finger, uncapped and

lit.

"You know..." Hyouko started, "I still can't do that."

"Well, sucks to be you." I retorted, pocketing my lighter.

"Heh, Roku's pissed." Dante said.

"Eh? Why you in a pissy mood, Roku?" Hyouko asked.

"Nothin'." I snorted, "Come on, we're gonna be late." I ran to the entrance of the thrift store.

"Late? Late for what?" Dante asked, checking his watch, "It's only eight o'clock. The night's young."

"Hmph." I grunted, entering the thrift store. Inside, I searched for anything that would look nice.

"Welcome." Horton said, removing his headphones, "Can I help you guys?"

"No thanks, I'm just looking." I said to him, sifting through the racks of clothing.

Hyouko went up to Horton and asked, "Do you have any lighters? You know, the Zippo type ones?"

Searching through the racks of clothes, something caught the corner of my eye. I looked toward the back of the store and saw what I needed. It was a black long-sleeve dress shirt. I took it off the rack and handed it to Horton. He immediately cut wing holes and patched the left arm. As he worked, I spotted a white beanie hanging on a coat rack next to the counter. I took it placed it on the counter. After paying him for his service, I took off my brown shirt and wore the "new" black shirt and white beanie, making sure that my halo floated above my head. With my outfit of black jeans, a black short sleeve dress shirt, white beanie, and white sneakers complete, we headed back to Pop's Garage, where I stored my brown shirt in my locker.

As we exited Pop's Garage, Hyouko suggested we go to a bar called "The Thirsty Isle". Dante and I agreed and off we went on our merry way, arguing with each other on who wore better clothes.

"Man." Hyouko said, trying to calm things down. "We'll let the girlies decide." Walking the short distance from Pop's Garage to The Thirsty Isle seemed even shorter during our argument. Dante and Hyouko went inside ahead of me. I decided that I had to do this sooner or later, so I might as well make it sooner.

Taking a deep breath, I entered the bar. At the back of the building, a small band was playing soft reggae style music. To my left, was the actual bar, stocked with hundreds upon hundreds of alcoholic as well as a few non-alcoholic beverages. To my right were tables, filled with crowds of young adults, mostly female. I noticed that they all wore black and white clothing. I breathed a sigh of relief, thanking whatever god was available in this place that we stopped by the thrift store. The crowds were all chatting amongst themselves. Some even took it upon themselves to move some tables aside and set up a

makeshift dance floor.

I followed Dante and Hyouko in to the bar and sat between them on a stool. They each ordered their drink; Hyouko ordered a bottle of beer, while Dante ordered a dry martini. I wanted to keep the pattern of the rising level of alcohol, so I ordered a glass of Kamikaze.

"Kamikaze?" The bartender asked. "Uh... we don't have that..."

Hyouko and Dante laughed at me. Still wanting to "one up" them, I told the bartender to mix several different types of drinks together which included Rum, Vodka, Seltzer water, Whiskey, Brandy, and a shot of Tequila. Hyouko and Dante looked at me as if I were crazy. I glared at them, and gulped the entire glass of the brown, bubbly drink, in one fell swoop. Dante yelled out a cheer as I ordered another glass of the same drink. As I cradled the second drink in my hand, I saw the same trio of girls that Hyouko and I leered at earlier today. They sat in a booth at the corner of the room, each smiling at me. I raised the drink in the air, toasting to them. They giggled and waved back.

"Check it out, man." I said elbowing Hyouko. "It's the girls we saw earlier."

"Eh?" Hyouko turned around and spotted them in the corner of the room, still giggling amongst themselves. "Hey girls! Come over here!"

"What're you doing?" Dante asked. "Don't make 'em come here!"

"Aww come on, Dante." Hyouko said, finishing his beer and ordering a copy of my drink. "Have a little fun."

"But what if Hikari finds out what I've been doing?" Dante ate the olive in his drink, "She'll be crushed."

I ordered him another copy of my drink and set it in front of him. As the girls neared, I took out my lighter and lit it using my signature technique. I then set Hyouko, Dante, and my drink on fire.

"Dante." I started, raising my drink into the air. "You do this with Hyouko and me, and we swear that Hikari will never find out about this night."

Hyouko raised his drink in the air. "This'll never leave the bar."

Dante looked at his drink. He took a deep breath and raised it into the air. "This'll never leave the bar." We all toasted each other and on the count of three, swallowed the flaming drink in one gulp. We all laughed as the girls stood behind us. We spun around and greeted them.

"I've never seen you before." The girl in front of me said. She wore her red hair up, letting two bangs fall to each side of her face. She wore black high-heels with white knee-high stockings. She had a black miniskirt, followed by a black bra that was visible through a white tank top. She tied her hair back with black and white scrunchies.

Sadly, I didn't even notice the other girls, nor did Hyouko or Dante notice the one in front of me.

"I'm sorta new here." I said, smiling and ordering her a copy of my drink, which the bartender took upon himself to name after me.

"I can tell." She rubbed my left shoulder. "Wow, that's cool."

"Uh..." I became a little nervous. I was hoping that she wouldn't be freaked about my missing arm.

"You're cute... for a Haibane." She smiled, sipping on her drink.
"Let's dance."

"Dance? I don't really know how." I admitted.

"Come on!" She laughed. "Fine, then I'll just sit here." She jumped up and sat on my lap.

"Cool." I said, gulping my "Roku" and ordering another.

The rest of the night was a blur of action. Drinking, laughing, and eventually when I was drunk enough, dancing. Every time we finished our "Rokus" we ordered another. Soon, the crowd of people began ordering "Rokus" and eventually, everyone had a glass of my creation in their hands.

As the night moved on, the girls, Hyouko, Dante and I moved on to another bar located on the opposite end of town. Once there, we informed the bartender about how to make a "Roku" and eventually, everyone in the bar had a "Roku" in their hands. The six of us repeated this cycle until I blacked out, falling to the floor and losing consciousness.

I woke to the sound of a knock on a door. Slowly, my vision returned to me. I saw a large brown door quickly swing wide open in front of me. A sad looking man appeared and examined me from head to toe.

"You got it?" He asked.

I wanted to respond, "What the hell are you talking about?" but I found that I couldn't move my mouth open. Strangely, I couldn't even move my body.

"Yeah, lemmie in." I heard myself say.

"Another dream..." I thought to myself. "Well, I might as well see what's gonna happen."

As "I" followed the man into the room, I felt myself reach into my left pocket and retrieve a revolver. I aimed it at the back of the sad man's head, and without hesitation, pulled the trigger.

Immediately, I went on a rampant search throughout the man's dirty apartment. I found a CD in a drawer in the man's bathroom and pocketed it. As I quickly walked to the exit, I spotted a girl in the doorway, wearing a white tank top and white pajamas, holding a plush puppy in her arms.

_ "The same girl from last time?" I thought to myself._

"What're you doing here?" I heard myself ask.

"I followed you..." She spoke softly, almost frightened to do so.

"Why?" I shouted back.

She stood there, looking at the ground for a moment. I paced back and forth in the room, kicking the sad man's body aside as I did so.

"Why are you doing this?" She asked.

"I try and try to provide for you, and this is how you repay me?" I heard myself say. "Didn't I tell you to stay home?"

"I was scared." She said, still looking at the floor. "The neighbors were making noises again-"

They were just fucking! I yelled. I walked over to her, reached back and hit her with the butt of my gun. The girl fell to her knees, holding her face. I then pocketed the gun into my jacket and stood above her. "Goddammit, next time I tell you to stay home, you do it!"

"But..." The girl said, sobbing uncontrollably. "I saw you bring you're gun... I wanted to stop you from hurting dad..."

_ "So the man I just killed was...?" I thought to myself._

"You know what'll happen if Rob finds out there's witnesses..." I kneeled next to her, holding her in my arms.

"Please... no..." She cried on my shoulder. "You'll protect me from him, right?"

"I took an oath." I said, grabbing her throat with my left hand. "You know I can't break it. If I do, then both of us die. If I keep my word, then I live."

"No... please!" she managed to choke out. I felt her pulse quicken, her neck throbbed with every beat of her heart.

"It's either you or me!" I said, tightening my grip. "This is what you get for butting in!" As she fell to the floor, I landed on top of her. I continued to yell. ***I WISH YOU WERE NEVER BORN WITH ME! I WISH YOU'D FUCKIN' DISAPPEAR! I WISH THAT YOU AND I WERE NEVER ABLE TO READ EACH OTHER'S MINDS! BURN IN HELL YOU FUCKIN' BITCH!*** I tightened my grip, forcing one of the girl's eyes to pop out of its socket; blood filled her other eye. She tried to struggle out of my grip, but was too weak. After a few moments of fighting, the girl became limp. I felt her heartbeat fade away. I felt her pulse go from inhumanly fast, to a complete stop. Her face became soft, her jaws unclenched, her remaining eye closed itself.

My own heart rate sped up as I stood on her body. I looked at a clock that hung on the wall. It's face read "Six O'clock". I then took out a cigarette and placed it in my mouth. Dropping the pack onto the

floor, I retrieved my lighter and lit it the way I always did. I then lit my cigarette, throwing the still flaming lighter onto the floor, not caring that the thick carpet caught on fire. I took in a breath full of cigarette smoke and exhaled through my nostrils. Suddenly, a tear rolled down my cheek. I began sobbing.

"Look what you fuckin' did." I chuckled, looking at the girl on the floor. I took in another breath full of smoke and reached into my left jacket pocket, retrieving my revolver. I pulled the hammer back with my thumb. Slowly, I raised it and touched the end of the barrel with my forehead. As I exhaled, I squeezed the trigger. Instantly, I escaped my body and flew into the sky.

the next morning

(PC)...

When the Kana returned home, she quickly told the others that Roku headed into the Western Woods. She was worried that he had gone to the other side of the wall. The girls all stayed up, keeping an eye toward the Western Woods, looking for a beam of light. After midnight, the girls formed a search party, deciding that since there was no light, Roku was instead lost, and not going to his Day of Flight. Equipped with flashlights and whistles (in case they get lost in the woods), the girls began frantically searching for Roku. They searched the Hill of Winds, the vast majority of the Western Woods, and eventually split up to search the main streets of town.

When the sun broke past the horizon, they gathered in the center of town at the fountain to report what information they each had gathered from the villagers. To their surprise, nobody saw a one armed Haibane roaming around. Exhausted, they headed home, disappointed that they couldn't find any leads to the whereabouts of Roku.

Slowly walking back to Old Home, they saw a bright beam of light emerge from the Western Woods.

"Oh no!" Kana yelled. "Roku!" She shouted out as she saw the light extend past the clouds. Tears began flowing down her cheeks.

"He's gone over to the other side of the wall already?" Rakka asked, running over to Kana and observing the light. She wiped tears from her own eyes.

"Not again..." Kana cried into Rakka's shoulder.

"We must accept it." Nemu said, patting Kana on the back. "It was just his time to go past the wall."

Kana wiped the tears from her eyes. "Yeah, you're right." She stood up.

"We should go and pray for him." Hikari suggested. They all agreed and headed for the ruins located near the edge of the Western Woods. After their prayer for Roku to have good luck in the world beyond the wall, the girls headed back to his room to gather for a meal in remembrance of the first male Haibane to be born in Old Home.

Hikari entered the room first. Kana stopped at the doorway and began

sobbing. Nemu and Rakka tried to comfort her, rubbing her shoulders.

"It was just too early." Kana said, wiping tears from her eyes. Suddenly, Hikari's high-pitched screams were heard inside the room. Quickly, the girls ran in to see what was going on. Inside, they spotted Hikari hitting a drowsy looking Hyouko who was lying on Roku's bed.

"WHAT'RE YOU DOING HERE? GET OUTTA ROKU'S BED!" Hikari screamed. She swung the pillow in her hands and hit Hyouko square on the head every time.

"Shaddup..." an unknown voice was heard in the direction of the dining table. Hikari turned toward the voice and screamed even louder.

"Eh?" Rakka, Nemu, and Kana said at the same time.

"DANTE! WHAT'RE YOU DOING HERE?" She ran over to him and started hitting him with the pillow in her hands. As the pillow landed squarely between his legs, he immediately flinched and grabbed his groin.

"God! That hurt!" Dante squealed, rolling left to right on the floor.

"GET OUT GET OUT GET OUT!" Hikari yelled at both of them.

"What's going on?" Rakka asked. At that moment, a loud groan was heard in the washroom. The three girls ran inside to inspect. They stopped in their tracks when they spied Roku lying in the bathtub, which was full of water. His clothes, gun, and holster were thrown everywhere in the room, giving it a messy appearance. His Haibane notebook was nearly empty and lying open in the sink.

"Roku?" the girls asked, blushing a little bit when they realized that Roku was naked. The sound of Hikari shouting at and hitting both Hyouko and Dante was heard outside.

"Mmmmm..." Roku groaned. "My head..." He rubbed his forehead, blinking a couple of times.

"What're you doing here?" Nemu asked, turning away.

"What'chu mean 'what am I doin' here'?" He asked slowly, chuckling to himself. "I'm trying to sleep!" He rubbed his eyes.

Kana balled her hands into a fist. The flashlight that she held in her hand cracked under the immense pressure. She growled loudly, prompting Rakka and Nemu to step aside.

"You **IDIOT!**" She screamed, throwing the flashlight at Roku's head. He didn't even flinch as it hit him and landed on the floor next to the bathtub.

"What happened?" Roku asked, rubbing the area of his head that was hit by the flashlight. "What's wrong with you all?"

"We thought that you had your day of flight." Rakka said, smiling at

Kana.

"Kana here was worried the most about you." Nemu added, smiling to herself.

"You were worried about me?" Roku said, turning to Kana. She blushed as he did so.

"Y-yeah..." She stuttered. "I-I... I was a little worried."

"Kana...?" Roku asked softly.

"Y-yes?" Kana asked, turning red. Rakka and Nemu exited, giving Roku and Kana some privacy, though they didn't close the door.

"Kana..." Roku took a deep breath. "Kana... you..."

"Y-yes?" Kana stepped forward.

"You... you mind if you could pass me the soap? Its right there on the sink." He smiled sheepishly, scratching the back of his head.

Kana grit her teeth in anger. She took the soap bar from the sink and threw it at Roku's head. Roku blinked as the soap bar hit the side of his head and landed in the tub.

"YOU MORON!" She yelled, storming out of the washroom and slamming the door behind her. Rakka and Nemu stared at her wide-eyed, surprised that Kana had acted the way she did.

"... thank you..." They heard Roku softly say through the washroom door.

**end chapter five**

* * *

>disclaimer: with the exception of Roku, Gordon, Magdalene, Naota and the names "Horton" for the old clothes dealer, and "Dante" for the assistant baker, I do not own any characters that have made an appearance in the story. I did this for fun, not for money. If you own these characters, please don't sue me. Please don't ruin my fun. Also, if you wish to paste this onto your site, please ask permission first and give credit where credit's due.

6. warming up

Updated May 18, 2005

_Yeah, I know it's late, but schools' almost over with. I promise I'll finish this before August... heh....

* * *

>chapter six: warming up**

After letting Roku, Hyouko, and Dante recuperate and gather their

thoughts, the girls dragged them downstairs to the dining room, forcing them to apologize for what they did to everyone last night last night. Roku bravely took the stand and spoke for himself and on behalf of Hyouko, and Dante, who were both still suffering from the rude awakening that Hikari had administered.

"Ahem." Roku cleared his throat as he stood from his seat, "I'm sorry if I worried everyone..."

"Which you DID!" Kana interrupted him. Rakka pulled her back down, motioning her to be quiet.

"Again, I'm sorry." Roku said, "It'll never happen again..." He looked to the floor in shame.

The girls observed the way Roku presented himself. His jeans and shirt were wrinkled to the point that it took the effect of crumpled paper. His hair was nappy and matted to his forehead; something that Roku usually took great care to avoid. His eyes were bloodshot, and dark circles appeared underneath. He struggled to maintain his balance as he stood. Rakka, who sat closest to him, smelled alcohol on his breath.

"What exactly did you do last night?" Rakka asked, waving the air in front of her with her hand.

"Uh..." Roku looked up in thought and scratched his head. "We went drinking."

"You WHAT?" Nemu yelled. "You're not allowed to drink alcohol in Old Home!"

"UH... excuse me? We weren't IN Old Home." Hyouko pointed out.

"Shut up you." Nemu hissed. "Go home now, before I hit you." She then pointed to Dante, "You go home too! I should tell Gordon about this!"

Hyouko shrugged and headed toward the exit. Dante, on the other hand, was trying to explain to Hikari that he didn't talk to any women while they were drinking.

"I don't care!" Hikari yelled. "Now out!" She pointed toward the door.

With his head hung in shame, Dante followed suit with Hyouko and exited the room, quickly heading back home.

"Well." Roku said, smiling to everyone. "Now that that's over with..." He began to walk away.

"STOP!" Nemu yelled out. Immediately Roku froze in place. The hair on the back of his neck, as well as his head, stood straight up. He nervously turned to face the girls, knowing that they were going to scold him to death.

"Sit." Nemu commanded. Roku instantly returned to his seat. "We're not done yet. You gave us all a scare last night, not to mention that we didn't get a wink of sleep. You can't just go off and pretend nothing happened." She looked at the others, smiling to each of them

as a light bulb flashed in her head. "I believe a suitable punishment is in order."

"Agreed." Hikari said happily.

"Yes." Rakka added.

"Abso-frickin-loutely." Kana chimed in.

"Now." Nemu said, putting a finger to her chin. "To make it fair, I believe that we each get to punish you accordingly. Since the Summer Harvest Festival is coming up, meaning there's a four-day weekend for all of us, I think that we each get a day to enslave, excuse me, I mean punish Roku. Rakka'll have today, Hikari, you get tomorrow, I'll get Monday, and Kana will get Tuesday. Agreed?"

"Actually, I have work tomorrow." Hikari pointed out. "The bakery needs extra help to make enough dough for the festival."

"Fine, we'll switch days." Nemu said. "Now do we have an agreement?"

"Agreed" The girls said in harmony.

"Don't I get a say in this?" Roku asked.

NO! The girls yelled back, making Roku lean back in his chair and fall to the floor.

(PC)...

_ "Dammit." _ I cursed myself as I walked back to my room to change. _ "If I'm going to do slave work, I might as well dress like one". _ In my room, I found a plain looking blue T-shirt and a pair of black shorts. I then found a pair of beat up, black leather boots and slipped them on. I then pocketed my cigarettes and lighter, and headed down to the kitchen where Rakka told me to wait for her.

Inside the kitchen, Rakka was preparing a breakfast of sausages and pancakes. She hummed to herself as she worked. I tapped her on the shoulder, getting her attention.

"Oh it's you, Roku." She said. "Mind helping me cook these pancakes?" She handed me a spatula.

"Actually, I mind." I said sarcastically. "But do I have a choice?" I smiled to her and began cooking the pancakes as she kept an eye on the sausages. As we worked in the kitchen, I couldn't help but notice that she would wipe her eyes every now and then. After closer observation, I noticed that she was crying softly to herself.

"What's the matter?" I asked, flipping a pancake onto a stack of three.

"Hm? Oh nothing." She clearly lied.

"No. There's something wrong." I said, pouring a ladle full of batter onto the griddle. "Come on, tell me." Again, I was able to see what

was on her mind, just like the time with Naota and Nemu. I felt a strange aura emitting from her.

She sniffed a bit and looked at me. "Well, it's just that when you were missing, we thought that you had your Day of Flight."

"Who me?" I asked, tapping the spatula on myself.

"Yes." She giggled. After some silence, she sighed out loud. "I hope nobody has their Day of Flight... not even me. I still wish that Reki and Kuu were here..."

I was shocked to hear this, especially from Rakka. Throughout the past month that I've known her, she always talked about the Day of Flight, saying how wonderful it was.

"Don't you think that's a little selfish?" I asked her, finished cooking the entire batch of pancake batter.

"Why?" she asked, finished with the sausages.

"Well, if you think about it, if you wish that on everyone, doesn't that mean you're being selfish?"

"Well..."

"If you don't want anyone to have their Day of Flight then how do you think they'll feel? Sure you'll be happy with everyone around you forever, but for how long? Everyone else will think that they failed as a Haibane and then will fall into the depths of depression. Eventually, their depression will trickle down onto you and then you'll be depressed." I turned to look at her. She hung her head and sobbed quietly.

"But, I just want everyone to be happy here."

"If you truly want them to be happy." I said, "Then you'll accept it."

She laughed softly, "I've heard that so many times... but I never listen..."

"Look, just think of it this way. If somebody has their Day of Flight, then that means they'll be happy wherever they end up. If they're happy, then wouldn't you be happy?"

"I've heard that many times, too... but you're right. I have to stop thinking this way... nothing lasts forever."

"Exactly. That's why you should enjoy your time here in Glie."

She smiled at me, wiping away tears from her eyes. "Thanks for the advice." I smiled back at her, noting that she no longer had a strange aura lurking around.

I tried to lighten the mood. "Have you noticed how Nemu is acting lately?"

"Yes." Rakka said. "It's almost as if she's trying to take over for Reki."

"Oh?" I started. "You mean Reki was as bossy as Nemu?"

"No." Rakka giggled. "Bossier."

We both laughed together as we prepared to serve breakfast.

At the dining table, I served the girls hearty portions of Pancakes, sausages and bacon. When they each received their meals, I served myself and sat down to eat. I looked around and saw that except for Rakka, everyone else was eyeing me, as if to keep a look out for anything that I'd do. Hikari faced her plate, though every now and then she would peek at me from the corner of her eyes. Nemu faced my direction only to space out and turn the other way. Rakka was clearly enjoying her meal, probably happy about the advice that I had given her. Kana, on the other hand, leered at me with evil eyes. Her glare looked as if she were trying to challenge me, trying to provoke me to do something bad. Annoyed, I finally spoke.

"What?" I snorted.

"What, 'what'?" She hissed back.

"What are you looking at me for?" I put down my fork.

"I'm keeping my eye on you, **boy**..." She placed an entire pancake into her mouth and chewed.

"'Boy'?" I shouted, "What do you mean 'boy'? I must be at least one or two years older than you!"

The other girls giggled as I said this.

"What?" I asked.

"Stupid." Kana growled, "I'm four years old. You're only one month old."

"What?" I shouted, "No way! I'm 18 years old!"

"How would you know that?" Kana said, "You know nothing of your past."

"Well, I know that I'm 18 years old." I said, pointing to myself. "You look like you're about 17."

"How can you tell?" Hikari asked, suddenly interested in this topic.

"Well, if you compare her to a 17 year old human, then she'll have similar features... minus the wings, of course."

"That is true." Nemu added, "Sumika tells me that I'm about 19 or 20."

"Ooh! How old do I look?" Hikari asked.

"I'd say 16 or 17." I said, resuming my meal.

"And Sumika tells me that Rakka looks like she's 15." Nemu

said.

"Whatever." Kana said, "I'm still older than you, Roku. So I can call you 'boy' or 'young'un' or whatever I want."

"Whatever." I said, wiping my mouth.

The rest of the day went by smoothly. I had turned the entire kitchen spotless, as per Rakka's command. After that was done, I did the rest of Rakka's daily chores, including watching the children, taking out the trash, and keeping the den in order. When I was finally dismissed at around nine o'clock p.m, I went straight to my room to bathe myself, deciding to skip dinner.

_ "Damn." _ I thought to myself as I scrubbed my body with a hand-towel, _ "How can she **do** that everyday?" _

After finishing my bath, I headed to my kitchen to prepare a small snack for myself. As I walked over to the kitchen, I noticed the full size mirror that stood next to the entrance. Feeling a little playful, I strapped my holster around me and began quickly drawing my gun, pointing it at my reflection on the mirror.

_ "Getting' faster every time..." _ I proudly said to myself. After a few hours of doing this, my arm felt heavy. I decided that it was time for me to sleep and prepare for Nemu's wrath. Before lying down, I checked the clock. Its face read "one fifty-one".

_ "Great." _ I thought to myself, _ "Only five hours of sleep..." _

Almost instantly, I was within the grasp of the sandman.

(PC)...

"Time to get up!" Nemu yelled into Roku's ear, forcing him to wake. As he slowly rose from bed, he rubbed his eyes a little and yawned.

"Yes ma'am." Roku said, still half asleep.

Nemu saw that her yelling didn't do much to wake him, so she sprayed him in the face with a spray bottle full of water. Roku flinched as the cold mist hit his face like a brick.

"I'm awake, dammit!" He said, wiping his face with his pillow.

"Yeah, right." Nemu said, putting her hands on her hips. "Your punishment from me is to clean the North wing of Old Home."

"The whole thing?" Roku asked, looking at Nemu as if she were crazy.

"Yes." She said, tossing him a set of keys. "These open the tool shed near the incinerator. You'll find everything you need there. Now get to work!" She pointed out toward the exit.

"Can't I eat breakfast..." he looked at the clock on the wall, which

read "four thirty", "What the...?" He said as he scratched his head.

"You can eat breakfast when it's ready." She said, leaving the room. Roku threw keys onto the floor, angry that Nemu had wakened him two hours before he had anticipated.

"Dammit." He said, as he got up to change into his work clothes.

The North wing of old home was nearly uninhabited. Inside, the fluorescent lights above flickered and buzzed. Roku went into the first door that he came upon and opened it. In a split second, a wall of dust hit his face like a brick wall. Immediately he ran back out into the hallway, coughing and dry heaving on the floor.

_ "Goddammit." _ Roku cursed himself, spitting dust from his mouth.
_ "How am I supposed to clean that?" _ He tried thinking of a way to enter the room without suffocating from the large amount of dust. As an idea flashed into his head, he ran back to his room and took a towel from the washroom. Soaking it with water, he wrung it so that it would be damp, and placed one end on his mouth. He then wrapped the rest of the towel around his face, tying the ends together behind his neck.

Inspecting himself in the mirror, and satisfied with his appearance, he ran out into the hallway, failing to see Kana carrying a large box of objects in his path. He crashed into her, making a loud thud as they both fell to the floor. The box spilled its contents onto the floor, creating a huge mess. Roku, quickly sat up and spotted Kana, leaning against the wall.

"Watch where you're going!" Kana yelled, rubbing her backside.

"My fault." Roku said, hopping back up to his feet. He reached out to help Kana get up. "Sorry 'bout that, but Nemu wants me to clean the North Wing." He flapped his wings a bit, shaking the dust off of them.

"Idiot." Kana said, grabbing a hold of Roku's hand and lifting herself up. "You think you can clean the whole North Wing by yourself?"

"I'll never know if I don't try." He said cheerfully, patting Kana on the back. She blushed a little as he did so. Immediately she pushed him away.

"Get back to work, stupid!" She yelled.

"Yes, master." He bowed, rewrapped the towel around his mouth and ran back downstairs.

"Stupid..." Kana said to herself, watching Roku jump down the stairs.

Roku worked the whole day, only stopping to eat a quick meal, or to use the bathroom. By the time dinner was ready, he was able to clean the entire first floor, and half of the second floor of the North Wing. Nearing dusk, he piled the old rotten furniture and other unusable items near the incinerator. He took an axe from the tool

shed and began chopping the items made of wood into small pieces that made suitable firewood. Roku started a small fire using a blanket he found that was soaked with kerosene, and tossed it into the incinerator that was filled to the brim with items that were made of materials other than wood.

Wiping the sweat off of his brow, Roku took a cigarette from his pocket and lit it by placing it near the open flame of the incinerator. Leaning against the pile of wood, he puffed it a few times, and then finally took in a deep breath. He held in it his lungs for a few moments, and then exhaled through his nostrils. He stood there, gazing at the fire as it danced in the darkness.

"You should stop smoking." Roku heard a voice say.

"What?" Roku said, caught off guard.

"It's bad for your health." Nemu approached from under the shadows and into the light that the flames and the moon produced.

"Make me." Roku said sarcastically. He smiled as he took another breath from the cigarette.

"That's what she would have said, too." Nemu walked next to Roku and sat on the wood.

"Who?" Roku asked, looking up at the stars emerging from the sky.

"Reki." Nemu said, looking up as well.

"Oh..." Roku said, holding the cigarette in his fingers. He tried to change the subject. "So I see that you're taking my advice."

"What?" Nemu asked.

"Rakka tells me that you're starting to act like Reki. And from what I gather, that's exactly the way I advised you how to behave."

Nemu sat there and thought for a second. "Yeah." She said. "I guess you're right..."

"Heh." Roku chuckled to himself.

"Thanks." Nemu said.

"For what?" Roku asked, looking down at her.

"For the good advice. I would have never pushed myself to become this way until you read me like a book." She smiled to him. "So, thank you."

Roku looked back up at the sky. He thought about yesterday, when he talked to Rakka. _"I wonder if she's the same way as well._ He thought to himself.

"I think that's you're cue to say 'You're welcome, Master Nemu'." She laughed.

Jokingly, Roku bowed on his hands and knees, kissed her shoes and

said in a British accent, "Nay, madam, for it is my duty to lay upon thee the advice of the heavens." He stood, turned sharply and walked away leaving Nemu sitting there alone, laughing to herself. She paused for a moment to catch her breath. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Hikari slowly walking to her room.

"Hey, Hikari!" Nemu called out. "How was work?" Hikari ignored her and continued walking. She had a look of concern on her face, almost as if something was bothering her. Nemu assumed that she was just tired from work, and shrugged it off.

(PC)...

That night, I slept like a rock. No dream came to me, nor did anybody come barging in to wake me. I awoke the next morning to the sound of soft knocking on my door.

"Come in." I yawned.

Hikari opened the door and entered. She stood by my bedside, hands behind her back.

"Morning." She said softly. "Could you do me a favor?"

My few hours of rest were shattered as she said this. Immediately, I got up and started changing my clothes.

"Do I have a choice?" I asked sarcastically, walking into the washroom. "Wha'cha need?"

"I want you to deliver this letter." She slipped a small sheet of folded paper under the door. I picked it up and began to read the perfectly handwritten message.

"Don't read it!" Hikari yelled, scaring me half to death. I followed her orders and folded the paper, putting it into my jeans pocket. I put on my holster and then on top of that, my shirt. I combed my hair and picked my teeth, making sure that I made myself presentable.

"Who do you want me to deliver it to?" I asked as I brushed my hair.

"... Dante." She said. I finished fixing my hair and exited the washroom.

"Really?" I asked, smiling to her. She began to perspire a little and chuckled nervously.

"Y-yeah. Tell him not to read it until tomorrow night... After the sun goes down." She said, scratching the back of her head.

"Fine." I said, pocketing the keys to my scooter. I opened the door for her, and motioned for her to exit first. She thanked me, and we both began to walk downstairs. Immediately, I was able to pick up an aura of worry from Hikari.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"Nothing." She said, shaking her head.

"No, there's something wrong." I said, standing in front of her.
"Come on, tell me."

"IT'S NOTHING!" she yelled. She covered her mouth with her hands and if she had no control over what she had said. "Sorry." She said, running ahead of me, and into the dining room. I knew something was wrong, but wasn't able to figure out what it was. I shrugged it off, figuring that I would be able to find out later on.

Breakfast was quieter than ever before. I could tell that Rakka and Nemu were enjoying their meals. They each had a faint smile painted on their faces, indicating that they were no longer cross with me.

_ "Hopefully they aren't..." _ I thought to myself.

Hikari, on the other hand, didn't even bother to touch her food. Instead, she sat there, picking her biscuit with her fingers, until it was a mound of crumbs. I wanted to say something, but then held my tongue, remembering how angry she was when I tried to help. I decided that if she didn't need my help, I wouldn't butt in.

Kana clearly took a disliking to me. Though, after our little run yesterday, I wouldn't blame her. She tore into her biscuits, chomping loudly with every bite, all the while she glared at me, keeping an eye on me like a hawk.

"Do you have a friggin' staring problem, or something?" I said, slamming my teacup onto its saucer.

She instantly turned red, and dropped her teacup onto the floor. It shattered into hundreds of pieces, creating a wet mess. She looked down to the floor, and said nothing, not even a single come back or retort.

"Uh... Kana? I was just joking..." I smiled to myself, "If you really do have a staring disorder... I completely understand..."

Kana immediately got up from her seat and ran out of the room, leaving all of us confused as to what was going on.

Nemu turned and eyed me, "What'd you do to her?" She asked.

"I didn't do anything!" I said with my hand in the air. "I swear!"

**later that same day**

As I rode my scooter into town, I couldn't help but wonder why Kana had reacted the way she did.

_ "Whatever it is..." _ I thought to myself, _ "She's probably over it by now. " _

At around noon, I met Dante at the front door of Pop's Garage. Still in his pajamas, I delivered Hikari's message, making sure to tell him not to read it until tomorrow after sunset, as per Hikari's request. He took the letter and began smelling it, sniffing every inch of the folded sheet of paper.

"What the...?" I started. He finally noticed me, carefully placing the letter into his pocket.

"Want some coffee?" He asked.

"Nah." I rejected, "I'm Hikari's slave today." I said smiling. I noticed that he had turned white. I raised an eyebrow, wondering why everyone today is acting strangely. I shook my head and left as fast as my scooter could take me. Even though I didn't want to do any more chores, it was better than seeing Dante act like the way he was, especially since he has Hikari's letter.

(PC)...

As Roku rode back home, he spotted Kana leaning against a windmill. He stopped and observed her, noticing that she was in deep thought, gazing into the horizon ahead of her. He parked his scooter, a short distance away and walked over to her. As he approached, she turned and immediately stood on her feet.

"What do you want?" She shouted at him, gritting her teeth. She balled her hands into fists, shaking them at her sides.

"Um... I'm sorry if I said anything wrong... you know... back at breakfast..." He scratched his head, wondering what else to say.

"Leave me alone." Kana sat back down, figuring that it wasn't worth the time to argue with him.

"Okay." He said, turning around a walking to his scooter. He knew better than to pound an insult further into a ground, especially if a person of the opposite sex was the recipient. Before he rode off, he took a cigarette from his pocket and lit it. He then took in a deep breath and opened the throttle, throwing dirt into the air. He never noticed that Kana quietly observed him as he rode off into the distance.

After reaching Old Home, Roku parked his scooter. Hikari greeted him as he walked to the incinerator.

"Did you deliver the message?" She asked, looking down at the ground.

"Yeah." Roku said, stopping in front of the incinerator. He started a fire and shoved in the remainder of the non-wood items that he cleaned yesterday. "You need anything else?"

"No." She said, "You're free to go." She smiled at him and ran off into the West Wing, closing the door behind her. Surprised that he was done for the day, Roku walked around Old Home, taking in the scenery, and absorbing the warm atmosphere that he had finally grown accustomed to. He strained to forget the forced surgery that he had gone through, but somehow that memory would creep its way back into his head.

Wanting to get away from the past, he took a deep breath from his cigarette, and held his breath for a moment. He then exhaled slowly, letting the chemicals in the tobacco relax him, making him feel more

at ease than ever before. He then yawned, and began walking some more. He then saw the small clock tower that was connected to the East wing. He then noticed that the clock on the face of the tower was no longer running. Its hands were stopped on the "six o'clock" hour. He went inside and climbed up the steep stairs, wondering why the clock had stopped.

At the top of the tower, his jaw dropped in awe as he saw that the gears were heavily damaged. The teeth of several gears were worn down by what looked like rust. He inspected the electric motor and saw that its wires were all burnt and fried. He then saw that all the springs and pulleys were all deteriorating. Every time he touched anything, rust would gather on his fingers.

_ "Is this why she's upset?" _ He thought to himself, remembering that Kana was the one who always worked on the clock tower. _ "Maybe I can cheer her up a little..." _ He removed his shirt and threw it to the corner of the room. Kneeling in front of the large electric motor, he quickly went to work, removing several wires and rearranging them into the correct order.

"Damn, these wires are all smoked..." He grunted to himself. "Gonna need some new ones..." He searched the room, finding a bundle of fresh wires stashed in one of the many boxes in the room. Retrieving the wires that he needed, he went straight back to work, wiping the sweat of his brow.

later

Kana grudgingly walked up the stairs of the Clock tower. She was tried from all of today's events, and all she wanted to do was relax by working on the rotting Clock Tower.

"Man, I wonder how I'm gonna fix this..." She said to herself as she opened the door to the gear room. Immediately, she stopped in her tracks, spotting Roku hunched over the motor. He was so busy tinkering with the wires inside the motor cage, that he didn't even notice Kana stomp her way behind him. She saw a white cylinder sticking out of his mouth. She balled her hand into a fist, angry that he was "enjoying" his unhealthy habit in her Clock Tower.

"NO SMOKING!" She tried to snatch the cylinder out of Roku's mouth, but to her surprise, he wouldn't let go. "LEGO! NO SMOKING DAMMIT!" She tried jerking it out of his mouth, only to have Roku follow every movement.

"Okay..." he said, finally opening his mouth. Kana fell back against the wall, holding in her hands...

"A lollipop?" She asked, staring at the wet, orange sphere on a stick that she held in her hand. "You were sucking on a lollipop?"

"If you wanted one, you should have just asked." He reached into his pocket and tossed her a blue lollipop. "Can I finish mine?" He smiled at her.

"Dammit..." she grit her teeth, balling her hands into a fist. She reached back, preparing to throw the candy at his head, but something caught her attention. Out of the corner of her eyes, she saw that the poles that used to hold the gears were spinning.

"You did this?" She asked, walking over to him.

"Yeah." Roku took his orange lollipop from Kana and placed it into his mouth. "I was bored."

"Uh..." Kana inspected at the motor, confirming that it truly was repaired. "Thanks?" She was speechless.

"Heh." He scratched his nose. "Your makin' me blush." He walked over to the power switch on the wall and turned it into the "off" position. "These gears are all rusted down. What happened?" he pointed toward the face of the giant clock.

"Well, I haven't had the time to maintain the gears." She admitted.

"You think your boss could spare us some? And a crane?" He looked up toward the ceiling, noticing that there was no way that the both of them could place each gear by hand. "This is gonna take some time... gonna have to remove the clock face... the hands..."

"Yeah... But you finished the most important part." Kana unwrapped her lollipop and placed it in her mouth. "Thanks." She turned away from him, trying to hide her red face. "You saved me at least a month of work... As you can tell, I'm still an amateur at electronics."

"It's okay." Roku said, walking past her and out the door. "Does this mean that I'm free tomorrow?"

"No." Kana said, throwing the candy wrapper at his head.

(PC)...

later that night

That night, I had the same dream that I have had before. The dream where I enter a sad looking man's house, and slaughter him along with a young girl that I know, yet cannot recall her name. The ending to the dream remained the same. I would point the gun at my own forehead and pull the trigger.

Again, I woke drenched in cold sweat. This dream, I realized, would waft in my head forever if I do not find any answers for my actions. I read "five fifteen" on the clock hanging on the wall. Not being able to go back to sleep, I dressed myself, deciding to explore more of Glie. I realized that I hadn't even seen the outer limits of the town.

As I exited Old Home, I spotted a letter on the bulletin board, addressed to me. It read:

FEATHER ROKU,

YOU ARE TO APPEAR BEFORE THE HAIBANE RENMEI AT SIX O'CLOCK TONIGHT.
BE PREPARED TO SPEND THE NIGHT AT THE TEMPLE.

Concluding that the Communicator wanted to talk to me again, I left

the letter for the girls to see. Continuing on my way toward the south end of Glie, I felt the ominous presence of eyes upon me. Quickly turning, I saw nothing except for the morning fog, as well as the faded image of the Hill Of Winds. Shrugging it off as mere paranoia, I continued onward.

Reaching the South edge of the wall, I looked around and found several logs leaning against each other so that they formed a sort of cone.

"That's good..." I said to myself. "Looks like someone put it there... for what though?"

"Who goes there?" A voice from behind called out.

"Huh?" I turned to face the sound. Slowly, the image of a cloaked man appeared, as if formed by the morning fog. I realized that it was the Communicator.

"Oh it's you, Roku." He said, approaching me. "I wasn't expecting you until later this evening."

"Yeah." I said, standing a little more at ease. "Should we have our meeting now?"

"No." He said, shaking his head. "Tonight is a more suitable time."

"Oh." I turned back toward the logs.

"Have you been using you're revolver?" He asked suddenly.

"No..." I said, feeling the bulge of the gun through my shirt. "I don't see a use for it."

"You should try to find a way to use it often."

"Why?" I turned to face him. "Why am I the only one in town with a gun? Why should I use it here? This town is too peaceful; firing the gun might frighten the townsfolk..."

"The Tooga have their reasons." He turned away from me. "They are much wiser than I. Maybe you should consider their request." With that, he walked away, disappearing into the mist.

I stood there, not knowing what else to say. My thoughts once again ran through my dream. The gun strapped on my chest was a small reminder of that dream, and I didn't want to have it anymore. I took off my shirt and unbuckled the holster, removing it from my chest. My hand shook with fear as I held the holster and the gun away from me. I tried everything in my power to let go and walk away, but it felt as if my right hand were holding onto it on its own.

"DAMMIT!" I cursed myself, quickly strapping the holster back to my chest. "What's the point of having a gun here?"

*end chapter six*

* * *

>disclaimer: with the exception of Roku, Gordon, Magdalene, Naota and the names "Horton" for the old clothes dealer, and "Dante" for the assistant baker, I do not own any characters that have made an appearance in the story. I did this for fun, not for money. If you own these characters, please don't sue me. Please don't ruin my fun. Also, if you wish to paste this onto your site, please ask permission first and give credit where credit's due.

7. parallel

Updated May 18, 2005

Just a few minor grammatical changes, nothing major.

* * *

>chapter seven: parallel**

Upon entering Old Home, Roku was greeted by several Young Feathers running about in the courtyard. They all ran up to him, surrounding him and staring at his left side. A sound of awe came from each child's open mouth, jaws on the floor.

"Hi there." Roku said, smiling and waving to each of the children.

The children immediately screamed joyfully and ran away, leaving a dumbfounded Roku behind.

"What was that about?" He turned to see Kana approach him.

"I dunno." Roku said, scratching his head. "I just said 'Hi', and then they all screamed and ran away..."

"It's because SOMEBODY has been spreading a rumor about you." Nemu approached Roku, dragging a struggling boy behind her. "Apologize to Roku this instant!"

"Eh?" Roku observed the young feather. His face was muddy and wet, giving the appearance of a sad puppy, with the exception of the feathers and halo. Roku bent down and smiled at the boy.

"What nasty little rumor has this little monster been spreading about me?" Roku said, patting the boy on his head. The boy grew angrier as Roku stroked his hair.

"My name's 'Dai' and don't you forget it!" He slapped Roku's hand away.

"Dai, huh?" Roku stood up. "So what's this rumor about?" Dai looked up at Nemu. Immediately she glared at him, as if trying to say "tell him".

"Uh..." Dai looked to the ground. "I said that at night your left arm comes back and strangles people to death..." Roku immediately became silent.

"So apologize!" Nemu shouted, forcing a laugh out of Kana.

"... sorry..." Dai whispered.

"Sorry for what?" Nemu shouted.

"I'm sorry for spreading that rumor about you..." He immediately ran away to join the other Young Feathers.

"Well..." Nemu said, wiping her hands. "That's that... eh, Roku?" She saw him standing there with a shocked look on his face. She waved her hand in front of his face, getting his attention.

"What's wrong?" Kana asked.

"Nothing..." Roku said. He immediately changed the subject. "So. What does master want me to do today?" He went down to one knee before Kana.

"Well..." Kana thought for a moment. "Help me salvage some of the gears in the clock tower. I saw the note from the Renmei, so your lucky butt gets a short day today." She snapped her fingers. "Now let's go and eat breakfast! Rakka and Hikari picked up some doughnuts, so let's fill up."

"Yes ma'am!" Roku said jokingly. He bowed several times, walking backwards toward the dining room.

Inside the dining room, Hikari and Rakka were both chatting away while nibbling on their doughnuts and sipping on their tea. Roku sat down and helped himself to several doughnuts and a cup of tea.

"So what were you doing earlier?" Nemu asked, sitter at her chair. "I went to your room to wake you, but you weren't there."

"Yeah, where'd you go?" Kana asked.

"I wanted to see the south end of town. The walls are huge." He finished his first doughnut.

"You went to see the walls?" Rakka asked, suddenly worried. "Did you touch it?"

"No. But I did see the Communicator there."

"What did he say?" Kana asked.

"Nothing." He lied.

"Well, since you have to stay at the Temple for the night, I'll go and pack you some blankets." Rakka said, getting up from her chair.

"No, I'll do it myself." Roku said, motioning for Rakka to sit back down. "Thanks, anyways."

"Why do you have to stay at the temple tonight, anyways?" Hikari finally spoke.

"Actually..." Roku started, finishing his second doughnut. "I don't really know. When I ran into the Communicator earlier, I asked if he wanted to talk right then and there... but he said the time was

inappropriate... Have any of you stayed there overnight?"

"No" Nemu said, vouching for the others as well. "This is the first time that the Renmei wanted somebody to spend the night there... At least, that's as far as I know of it..."

"Hmmm..." Roku leaned back in his chair. Not knowing how to respond to what Nemu said, he continued eating his share of doughnuts.

later

After breakfast, Roku and Kana quickly set out to salvage any usable gears from the clock tower. Though handicapped, Roku volunteered to climb several wooden beams in order to reach gears near the bells on the very top. Checking each and every one of the rusted gears, he found that almost none were useable, and that they would need a crane to be able to access the bells, as well as remove the face of the clock to do any further repairs.

"Damn..." Kana said checking her pocket watch. "You think anyone in town would lend a crane to us?"

Roku hopped off of a beam and onto the floor. Wiping his hand on his pants, he looked up and shook his head.

"Maybe Pops could persuade some of his friends to lend us a crane." He thought for a moment. "But then again, I think they're using it at the moment."

Kana sat on a wood box in the corner of the room and sighed loudly to herself. "Dammit... this'll take forever..." She scratched her forehead. "And it was working perfectly before you came..."

"You blaming me?" Roku placed a cigarette in his mouth.

"No smoking." Kana said, prompting Roku to return the cigarette in the box. "And no, I'm not blaming you... it's just that I worked so hard to rig it up so it could run off of electricity, instead of inertia..."

"How long did it take you?" Roku leaned against the wall next to Kana.

"About a month and a half... and that was just the wiring." She put her head in her hands.

"I'm sure with the both of us working on it; it'll be fixed by the end of winter." He counted the months in his head. "It's the end of summer, so we'll have what? Six months? No problem."

"You think so?" She looked up at Roku.

"Yeah, as long as we get a crane as soon as possible..." He smiled as he scratched his nose.

"Uh, problem?" She returned her head to her hands. "The summer harvest festival is tomorrow. Nearly everything's closed until this Sunday."

"'Till Sunday? Why?"

"It's tradition. This Wednesday marks the end of summer. After tomorrow, there's supposedly no season until three days pass, and then fall starts on Sunday."

"Weird..."

"I know." Kana sighed loudly again.

"Is there some sort of ceremony that goes on during the next four days?"

"Hmmm..." Kana looked up and thought for a few seconds. "Well, the Tooga are coming tomorrow to trade. Even though the entire town isn't supposed to talk in the Tooga's presence, there's always a big crowd just to see them."

"You think that's why the Communicator wants me to stay at the temple?" Roku sat on the floor, shifting himself over to Kana.

"I dunno. The Tooga seem to have a liking toward you, after giving you that gun and all."

"You think so?"

They both sat there, talking to each other for the entire day. Conversations went back and fourth between several topics, but both Roku and Kana never really cared about the subject itself. An obvious tension grew between them, thickening with every passing moment. Kana was never comfortable around guys her age for several reasons, with no experience talking to any being the primary reason. Roku, on the other hand had a darker secret lurking in the back of his head. He unconsciously reminded himself of that girl in his dream. How horrific he had treated her; how he had killed her in a brutal manner. He wanted to avoid any and all of it.

By the time the sun was setting, both Roku and Kana's voices were hoarse and scratchy. They had both jolted up, not realizing that they were leaning each other, shoulder-to-shoulder. Before one could say something, a voice was heard from below.

"HEY! DINNER TIME!" It was Nemu.

Roku and Kana smiled at each other, not knowing what else to say. Heading downstairs, they both found that it was no easy task. Kana felt a strange sensation growing from within. It wasn't sickness, nor was it the massive amounts of dust that she inhaled earlier. She didn't bother talking to Roku about it, though she found it strange that when she tried to say something, the feeling grew stronger. Passing it off as hunger, she punched Roku in the arm as she ran out the door and into the West Wing.

(PC)...

Before dinner, I went to my room to prepare for tonight's meeting the Communicator. I found a small duffel bag in the closet and filled it with things that I thought I might need. Clothes, undergarments, and my hair brush were thrown in along with a bottle of aspirin for good measure. Satisfied, I brought it downstairs and set it against the

front door.

As we sat at the dining table about to enjoy our meal of Spaghetti and garlic bread, a soft knocking was heard coming from the front door. Rakka was the first to stand and answer the door.

"Rakka?" I called out after a few seconds of silence. "Who's there?"

As if on cue, she emerged from the hall way and back into the dining room. Behind her followed the Communicator. The girls instantly became quiet, not wanting to offend the Communicator.

"Are you ready?" He asked. Immediately I stood and shook my right wing, answering that I was ready, though I was a little disappointed that I wasn't able to even taste the spaghetti.

"Good. We shall take our leave." He motioned for me to follow him outside. Before doing so, I opened my duffel bag, making sure to double check my gear as well as the gun strapped to my chest. Confirming that everything was where it was needed to be, I hoisted the bag off the ground and over my shoulder. I waved good-bye to the girls, and followed the Communicator out the door.

As we both walked past the gates of Old Home, my stomach growled uncontrollably, embarrassing me in front of the Communicator. I tried everything to make the growling stop, but nothing worked. Eventually, my stomach stopped itself, returning the silence that was once there. The Communicator stopped near the bulletin board and turned my name tag around to the red side.

"You are hungry, yes?" The Communicator asked, continuing to walk out of Old Home.

I raised my right wing to answer yes, but realized that there were no bells attached to me. I hesitated a little, not knowing weather to speak or run ahead of him and then answer again.

"You needn't worry; you are always allowed to talk to me." He said.

"Why's that?" I asked.

"You'll see in time. Now answer my question."

"Well, I was in the Clock Tower all day with Kana."

"And?"

"We were just talking all day, so I never had the chance to eat lunch..." I rubbed my stomach, which growled once again.

"Hahaha!" He laughed. "Do not worry. There is a reason why I chose to retrieve you at this time. Before I left, I had the Renmei prepare a meal for us." He then continued laughing to himself.

It was awkward hearing the Communicator laugh so heartily. I had always thought that he was a man of little words; at least that's what I had gathered from all of our meetings.

"Why so many riddles? Why don't you just tell me now?" I spoke before I even knew what I had said. I quickly tried to stop myself, but it was too late. The Communicator halted and turned to face me.

"When the time is right, everything will be clear to you." He sounded like a clichÃ© story to me. I sighed to myself, upset that he answered my question with yet another mystery.

During the rest of the walk to the Temple, I kept to myself, hoping that the Communicator would do so as well. Luckily, he did, making the rest of the walk to the temple as silent as possible, with the exception of the sound of our footsteps. After what felt like an eternity, the Temple came into view. I breathed a sigh of relief, glad that the long awkward walk with the Communicator was over.

Outside the Temple doors was a Renmei Member ready to greet us and place the silver bells on my wings and wrist. He bowed toward me, and then opened the large doors. He then led us through the inner forest and into the same room that I had seen Rakka enter. Inside was a dank stone hallway, lit by small torches, giving it a subtle orange hue. We walked through the winding tunnels, turning left and right as if we were inside of a snake, until we reached a wooden door. I thought it strange that a hall way that seemed to be carved from stone would have a single door made of wood, while the rest were sliding blocks of granite.

The Renmei Member then made hand symbols, focusing them toward the Communicator. They exchanged signals several times, prompting me to wonder what they were doing. Finally, the door opened and out emerged another Renmei Member. The Communicator signaled for me to follow him. Inside was what appeared to be a dining hall, list by literally millions of candles. The room itself seemed to be carved from the innards of a giant tree. I found no decorations on the walls, only a long table with only two places set for a meal. The Renmei Members ushered me toward the far end, setting me down and taking my duffle bag. They exited the room, leaving me alone with the Communicator at the opposite end of the table. I felt nervous not having him close to me. He seemed to be miles away, though in reality he was only about twenty feet ahead of me.

"That's odd..." I thought to myself. "Just a few moments ago, I wanted him as far from me as possible..."

"What's all this about?" I asked nervously.

"Hmm?" The Communicator sipped on what looked like a large teacup. "Oh, it's dinner time."

"Where's everyone else?" I looked around, but only found one door.

"Everyone else? Oh, they're preparing the meals for us. Only ten members of the Haibane Renmei reside here, including myself, so everyone works."

"Only ten?" I was shocked at the small amount of residents here. Judging from the sheer size of the hallway, and this table, I had assumed that there were at least fifty members of the Renmei.

"Yes, that is the limit." The replaced his teacup onto it's saucer.

"I'm sure you have many more questions, but now is not the time."

"But I thought you called me here for our usual meeting?"

"No." He reached under the table and retrieved a large tome. "You are here to learn the Language of the Tooga."

"Language of the Tooga?"

"They are visiting tomorrow during the Summer Harvest Festival. They wish to meet with you personally."

"But I can't learn a new language in one night!"

"It is not a vocal language, but a language of the hands."

"You mean that sign language that you were doing earlier?"

"Yes."

"But I saw you using both hands at the same time... how can I..." I looked to my left side. The pain that I felt from the amputation slowly seeped back into that area. I held the pain inside, trying not to show it.

"Let us begin with dinner first. Students absorb information better with a full stomach."

As if on cue, a Renmei Member came in, pushing a cart with domed silver platters on top. He first served the Communicator and then me. Slowly, I opened the dome cover, and peeked inside.

"Spaghetti?" I was surprised to see such a simple meal of spaghetti and garlic bread in such a lavish temple.

"I do enjoy a nice simple dish, once in a while." The Communicator chuckled.

I was a little at ease after seeing the pasta before me.

"He probably asked the Renmei to make spaghetti before he came to pick me up... This must be the reason why he was laughing so much earlier..." I thought to myself as I lifted my fork from the table.

"It is." Once again, the Communicator read my thoughts. "You see? Things are beginning to clear up, little by little."

(PC)...

The next morning, the girls of Old Home prepared themselves and the Young Feathers for a day off at the Summer Harvest Festival. It was getting a bit brisk outside, so they each wore something warm, taking Rakka's advice to try and not catch a cold. Before they left, they had a small breakfast of a bowl of fruit and cereal.

Naturally, the children started complaining that they wanted doughnuts, until Dai and Hana reminded the rest of the Young Feathers

about Roku's predicament. Immediately, the Young Feathers gobbled the cereal, splashing milk and crumbs every which way.

After catching up with the Young ones, the girls took their time and cleaned the dishes, annoying the children on purpose. After a while when everything was done and counted for; off they went to the now festive town of Glie.

Banners wishing for a good winter season were hung everywhere, and bands played autumn tunes of joy. To Rakka, everyone seemed to be in a great mood. Though when she looked over her shoulder at Kana, that feeling soon evaporated and turned into worry.

"What's wrong?" Rakka asked.

"Nothing." Kana replied, trying to keep up with the child she was holding.

"I know you better than that, Kana." Rakka said. "You can't fool me."

"Well..." Kana started. "I was just wondering what the Renmei is doing to Roku. After the way he was treated, you'd think he'd be in hell talking to them, let alone spend an entire night over there."

"Roku is a good Haibane." Rakka said, holding a finger in Kana's face. "And Good Haibanes do what they are told."

"Hmph." Kana grunted. "You are such a goody two shoes." She rubbed her knuckles on Rakka's head.

"Ow! That hurts!"

"Shhhh!" Nemu grabbed the attention of the both of them. "They're holding market at the square."

Immediately, the group of Haibanes from Old Home ran over to the town gates to catch a glimpse of the incoming Tooga. This was the first time that the Young Feathers had seen the Tooga, so the girls had to put in extra effort to keep them quiet.

After a few moments of silence, the gates of Glie opened, and in came several Tooga, pulling carts filled with goods behind them. A horn sounded, playing a tune of celebration toward the crowd. From a tent to the left of the gates, came the Communicator, as well as an entourage of ten Renmei members.

"Hey..." Hikari whispered to the girls. "Look at that..." She pointed to a Renmei Member dressed in a silver cloak, instead of the uniform dark grey. The Member seemed to be observing the area, instead of facing forward like the rest. His silver mask was in the shape of a diamond, accented with colorful lines of sky blue and black. What stood out the most was the person's wings. Instead of being covered in cloth like the others, it was covered in silver mail and bells.

"Roku?" Kana wondered. She ran to the front of the crowd and got a closer look at the new Renmei Member. She gasped in surprise when she saw that his left sleeve was limp and lifeless, almost as if nothing

was there to support it...

"Roku!" She called out to him. Fearing for Kana's life, Nemu ran over to her and covered Kana's mouth before anymore sound escaped. Kana struggled a bit until she finally calmed down, realizing that she was breaking sacred rules.

The girls then gathered in the best possible area to observe what was going on. They were each curious, especially after they all confirmed that the new Renmei Member was indeed Roku.

The Communicator signaled for Roku to stand at his side. They both then walked over to a Tooga that seemed to be the leader of the rest. His brown cloak had a little bit more designs sewn onto the rim of the hood. After a few exchanges of hand symbols between the Communicator and the Leader, Roku stepped forward, showing himself to the Tooga. The Leader then laid his hands of Roku's shoulder, appearing to inspect Roku's body. After a brief moment of awkwardness, the Leader then made more hand symbols, this time toward Roku.

"Oh no..." Rakka whispered to the girls. "He can't do the hand symbols because of his missing arm..." The girls were now worried that Roku would respond the wrong way and be punished for it. But to their surprise, Roku responded to the Leader by showing hand symbols, though he did more symbols than when the Leader did. With their jaws on the floor, the girls continued to watch as an entire conversation occurred between Roku and the Leader of the Tooga.

After a while, the Leader signaled for another Tooga to present to Roku an elaborate wooden box and a smaller, yet equally decorated blue cube. Another Tooga quickly stood before Roku, and bowed. He then placed a silver chain-link necklace around Roku's hood, trying not to see each other's eyes. Roku took the box and cube from the first Tooga and then bowed to the Leader, afterwards returning to the pack of Renmei Members. The Communicator turned to Roku and made a few hand symbols toward him. Roku bowed once more, and then walked over to the girls, whose mouths were still hanging from their heads. He removed his mask and smiled to them as if nothing happened.

"Hey." He said casually.

The girls then grabbed a hold of his cloak and dragged him away from the gates of Glie. They pulled him across town, not allowing him to speak. He struggled to stay on his feet, but the force of all four girls pulling him, and a few playful Young Feathers, made the act extremely difficult. Eventually, the girls sat Roku down onto a table at CafÃ© Kartie. Immediately they interrogated him, squeezing from him any information about what had just happened. Nemu was the first to speak.

"Just what was that?" She asked. "What exactly did you do at the temple last night?"

"Well..." Roku removed his hood and brushed his hair with a napkin. He then took the necklace off from around the hood, and repositioned it around his neck. "I learned the Language of the Tooga."

"The Language of the Tooga?" Rakka started. "You mean the hand

symbols you were doing?"

"Yeah."

"But how were you able to do that? Don't you need two hands to do it correctly?" Rakka hit the palm of her hand on the table, surprising everyone, including herself.

"It's odd, but they actually have a rule for people with only one hand." He held up his hand and showed them a symbol. "You see, they read from left to right, so the first sign that I do would represent my left hand. Then the next sign I do would represent my right hand."

"I see. So the Tooga are prepared for anything that might happen..." Hikari said.

"I guess." Roku scratched his nose.

"Enough of this!" Kana said, standing up. She pointed at the box in Roku's lap. "What did the Tooga give you this time? And what did they say to you?"

"Hmm..." Roku opened the box, revealing hundreds of bullets, obviously made for his gun. "They just wanted to meet me in person for the first and last time."

"First and last?" Rakka asked.

"Well, they're supposedly getting replaced. Every once in a while a new set of Tooga are chosen, the old ones get replaced. So the next time the Tooga visit, it'll be their first time. I have no idea who or what chooses the Tooga, so don't bother asking."

"So what's with all the bullets?" Kana sat back down.

"They wanted to tell me to practice my marksmanship. I don't know why, but I feel as though they can see the future. They told me that I was supposed to watch over all of the Haibane, even those in Abandoned factory."

"You?" Kana laughed. "The 'Protector' of all of Us?" she laughed a bit more.

"I don't quite understand it myself. I don't like the feeling I get when I'm holding the things that the Tooga have given me. It just doesn't feel right."

Silence fell upon the group of Haibane sitting around the table. Roku looked down as he rolled in his hand the blue cube that the Tooga had given him. Hikari finally broke the silence.

"What is that?" Kana asked, pointing to the cube in Roku's hand.

"Well... I don't know..." He said, inspecting the cube up close. It was the color of the sky, decorated with silver trinkets and chains, though it was only about two inches all around.

"Is it for your gun?" Nemu asked.

"No." Roku tossed the cube in the air and caught it. "It's pissing me off, but they told me to use it when the time is right."

The girls looked at him as if he were crazy.

"Sounds kinda lame, huh?" He scratched the back of his head.

**end chapter seven**

* * *

>disclaimer: with the exception of Roku, Gordon, Magdalene, Naota and the names "Horton" for the old clothes dealer, and "Dante" for the assistant baker, I do not own any characters that have made an appearance in the story. I did this for fun, not for money. If you own these characters, please don't sue me. Please don't ruin my fun. Also, if you wish to paste this onto your site, please ask permission first and give credit where credit's due.

8. in the mix

Updated May 18, 2005

Changed the "God" scene. I didn't like the first one.

* * *

>chapter eight: in the mix_

I woke to the sounds of soft footsteps heading in my direction. Sitting up, I spied a girl about my age stopping in her tracks, smiling as she did so. Her soft face reminded me of a person I knew so long ago, but could not bring myself to remember her name. Her white wife-beater was torn in several areas, and her faded blue jeans were worn thin at the knees. Her emerald eyes shined in the dim light of the lamp at my side. Her Brown hair was worn in a ponytail, held by a rubber band.

I scanned my surroundings, realizing that I was no longer in old home. My entire body ached. It felt as though I swam an entire ocean twice. Surprisingly, something was pinching my left armâ€|

"Wha!" I looked down to my left side and spotted a sight for sore eyes. My Left arm was back. I raised it into my view and balled my fingers into a fist. I cracked a few knuckles making sure I could feel every little bit of pain, pleasure or whatnot from it.

"What's wrong?" The girl broke the silence. She moved in closer, sitting at my bedside.

"Eh?" I looked at her as she smiled to me. For some reason, I felt extremely nostalgic every time I looked into her eyes. It was almost as if I was looking at a female version of myself. "Nothing." I said.

"You look like you had a nice dream." She said, stroking my hair.

Just then, something inside of me snapped. I could no longer control my body; it was if I was watching a movie, and the screen was my own eyes.

"Shut up!" I yelled at the girl, slapping her hand away from my head.
"Why'd you wake me up?"

"It'sâ€| fourâ€|" She withdrew from my bed and stood before me, looking at the floor in shame. I wanted to stop myself from screaming at her but everything I tried ended in failure.

"Goddammitâ€|. Stay here, I'll be back." I sat up, sitting on the bed, opposite from the girl.

"You'll get into trouble if you... why do you have toâ€|" She whispered loudly.

"Because he owes Robert money! He owes ME money!" I stood up and went to a pile of clothes in the corner of the room. I gasped to myself as I saw the ever so familiar sight of a brown-plaid dress-shirt, black jeans and a black belt. Putting on the clothes gave me the same feeling I had when I first put them on in Glie. I then walked to a chair near the bed and took a coat from of the backrest. Putting the coat on, I peered out the window, spying that local scenery.

Obviously, this was the innards of some modern city. Outside, the lights of tall skyscrapers could be seen in the distance, while the dark and dank colored buildings surrounded the rest of the view. The sound of a jetliner above rattled the tables in the room, giving it the feeling that this building could collapse at any given moment.

"But he'sâ€| our father." She sat on the bed, still looking at the floor.

"No" I said as I fixed my collar. "He's YOUR father, not mine. Rob's my father, now. He's always been there for me. Not like that fat, whore fuckin' pig your daddy is." From the drawer next to the bed, I retrieved a revolver. Upon closer inspection, the revolver matched the one I had in Glie.

"_Godâ€| this isâ€| it can't beâ€|_ I thought to myself.

The girl stood at her feet, glaring at me; piercing through my skin with her emerald green eyes. I stood there, not knowing what to say, surprised that she was standing up to me.

"Robert is dead! Why do you have to do this? Why is that hit-list so important to you?" She said in an angry tone. Tears began flowing down her cheeks. I desperately tried to stop myself from marching over to her, but to no avail. My left arm reached back, and quickly struck the girl in the face with the handle of the gun. She fell to the floor, holding the side of her head, trying to rub the pain away.

"Don't you ever talk to me that wayâ€| I saved you from the streets. I gave you a place to live. I gave you a normal life, and this is the thanks I get?" I cocked the revolver's hammer with my thumb, pointing it directly at the girl's forehead. "I owe everything to Rob. It's my

duty to complete his unfinished business. I saved this bastard for last because of you!"

"You call this a normal life?" she whimpered. She leered into my eyes, desperately begging for me to stop, yet at the same time, I felt her hatred for me well inside her. She had reached her boiling point, but the gun in my hand kept her from doing anything else. She stood up, tearfully facing me eye to eye.

"**FUCK!** I yelled, firing a shot next to her ear. "Stay here!" I screamed as I returned the gun to my coat pocket. I then stormed out of the room, leaving the girl alone to wallow alone in the dank room.

I woke to the sound of soft knocking on the door. Sitting up on my bed, I rubbed my eyes free of caked tears, clearing my vision and enabling me to see my room filled with the early morning sunlight.

"_Another dreamâ€|" I thought to myself.

"Roku?" Nemu called from the other side of the door.

"Huh?" I answered back, getting out of bed.

"We're all going to the Thrift store to get some warm clothes for the winter. You want to come?"

"Yeah, go on ahead. I'll catch up with you later." I walked into the bathroom to do my morning "business".

"Ok. There are omelets in the dining table. Please clean up when you're done. The house mother is taking care of the Young Feathers, so don't worry about them."

"Yeah."

"We'll see you later then." I then heard the sound of her footsteps fading away into the distance.

Alone in the bathroom, I hung my head over the sink, analyzing the dream that I had last night. Was it a premonition of things to come? Was it a metaphor for me to take action for something? I splashed cold water on my face, forcing myself to stop thinking such thoughts.

After I changed my clothes, I walked over to the dining room, finding a plate of ham and cheese omelet and toast set in my place. I ate as fast as I could, not wanting to keep the girls waiting. After I cleared the table and washed the dishes, I went outside and sat on the edge of the old water fountain in the center of the courtyard. I couldn't help myself to think and analyze my dreams a bit more.

As I placed a cigarette into my mouth, I spotted a woman reading the bulletin board near the gate. She wore an unbuttoned faded jean jacket with a black T-shirt underneath. Her skirt matched the color of dark mud, and her brown boots appeared to be heavily used. Oddly though, her black hair shined in the sun; each strand reflecting the light into my eyes. She turned to face me, smiling as she did so. Her black eyes pierced my soul, as if she were a being from another

world. I felt a chill run down my spine; I wasn't able to tell weather if it was the woman's glare or the gust of autumn wind that made me shiver.

"Can I help you?" I asked, walking over to her. I noticed a soft expression written on her face.

"No." She said. "I'm just visiting."

"Visiting who?" I asked.

"Everything." She said without any emotion.

"Uhâ€|" I was confused.

"Where's Nemu and the others?" She asked, leaning against the wall, opposite of the bulletin board.

"Hmm? They went into town. They'll be back before lunch, I guessâ€|"

She reached into her jacket pocket and retrieved a pack of cigarettes. She tapped the bottom and, like magic, a single cigarette slid up and out into the open. She plucked it and placed it into her mouth, replacing the pack into her pocket. She then felt her other pocket, feeling for some object.

"Got a light?" She asked, smiling a bit sheepishly.

"Uhh, yeah." I took out my lighter and lit it the way I usually do by holding it upside down between my thumb and middle finger, and snapping.. After her cigarette was lit, I did the same to mine, returning my lighter into my pocket.

"That's a fancy way to light that thing." She said, taking a deep breath from the cigarette.

"Hah, thanks." I exhaled a puff of smoke through my nostrils.

"So how are they? The girls, I mean."

"Uh, they're fine." I flicked the ash of my cigarette onto the ground. "Hikari seems to be having boy troubles, but I'm confident that she'll get over itâ€|"

"What about Nemu?"

"Nemu's been taking charge. Supposedly she's acting like a girl named 'Reki', but I have no idea who she is, so I can't sayâ€|" I don't know why I was telling everything to this strange woman, but somehow it felt natural for me to do so. It was as if she put an aura of calmness around me, making me feel comfortable around her. It felt like she was a close friend.

"And Kana?"

"Well, Kana and I have been hanging around each other a lot more now. But it's nothing seriousâ€|" I blushed. "We just have lots of things in common."

"What about Rakka?" She flicked the ash of her cigarette onto the ground.

"Rakka?" I paused for a moment. "When I first came here, Rakka was a little down. I figured something was bothering her, so I talked to her. Found out that she wished that nobody would have their 'Day of Flight' like these girls named 'Kuu' and 'Reki'." She's over it now. Been fine and dandy ever since."

"That's good to know." I'm glad that they're getting along easily." She crushed her cigarette butt under her boot. "Please don't tell them I was here!" She began walking away from me.

"Wait! Who are you anyways? I didn't even get you're name."

"A friend. I'll see you soon." Within a blink of an eye, she disappeared from my view, as if she was never there.

Dazed and confused, I slapped myself several times, making sure I was awake. Recoiling from the pain, I confirmed that I was awake, and that girl was there talking to me!

"_Weird_!" I thought to myself. "_I swear that she was here a second ago!" Shrugging it off as a mirage, I hopped onto my scooter and headed for town to catch up with the girls.

The town of Glie was one again at peace. After all the commotion yesterday about the arrival of the Tooga and the Summer Harvest Festival, everyone was exhausted and just wanted to rest.

"_Must be why there's three days off before autumn starts..."_ Roku thought to himself.

As he rode his way past buildings and weaving in and out of traffic, Roku noticed that everyone seemed to be looking at him. Not one to receive too much attention so warmly, Roku sped up, trying to get to the Thrift store as fast as possible.

at the thrift shop

Roku parked his scooter next to the entrance of the Thrift store. Peeking through the window on the door, he spotted the girls chatting away as they searched through piles of clothing. Taking a deep breath, he entered the shop, instantly causing all the girls to stop talking. They stood there, leering at him, making him feel more and more uncomfortable with every passing second.

"Man, not you guys too!" Roku said.

"Hey!" Horton entered from the backdoor. "It's the town celebrity! Come on in! What can I get'cha?" He motioned for Roku to come closer.

"And what exactly do you mean by 'not you guys too'?" Kana asked, punching Roku on his shoulder. She playfully tossed a black trench coat on his shoulders, trying it out for size. "That looks nice on you."

"You mean you aren't going stare at me like the rest of the town?" Roku rubbed his shoulder. He straightened out the coat, making it fit

perfectly on himself. "This is nice." He said to Kana.

"What are you talking about?" Horton said.

"When I came into town, everyone that I passed looked like they had a staring problem." Roku took off his coat and placed it on the counter.

"Really?" Nemu said. "Did you do anything to them?"

"No, they just stared at me until I passed them by." He turned to face Horton. "What's up with them anyways?"

"Hmmmâ€| I haven't heard anything about that, but the people that I talked to think that you're some kind of God. Hell, they've even started to build a statue in your honor. Of course, not everyone thinks that wayâ€| take me for example. I really don't think you're all that special."

"Thanksâ€|?" Roku sat on the floor. "So they really think I'm a god?"

"Yeah, man. Only the Communicator gets to talk to the Tooga. Seeing one of our own talk to the Tooga just means that we're this closer to them, whatever they might be."

"Soâ€| the town is just misunderstood on what Roku is to the Tooga." Hikari said, still rummaging through a box of clothes. "We simply just tell them the truth."

"It seems that way." Roku sighed. "But maybe I can use my godliness to my advantageâ€|" He smiled widely to the girls.

"That's not very nice." Rakka said. "You shouldn't abuse your supposed 'authority' on ill informed people."

"I was just joking!.." Roku said. "Oh! That reminds me. A visitor stopped by Old Home earlier this morning."

"Visitor? For whom?" Nemu asked.

"She said she was visiting everyone."

"Who was she?" Hikari asked.

"I don't know, she didn't give me her name."

"Then what did she look like? Maybe we can figure out who it is then." Rakka asked.

"Wellâ€|" Roku thought for a moment. "She had long black hair, black eyes. Umâ€| a faded blue jean jacketâ€| brown long-sleeve shirt underneathâ€| a long brown skirtâ€| she wore some mud brown bootsâ€| kinda soft, fair skin toneâ€| kind cute, if you don't mind me saying so... and... she smokes."

The girls rushed Roku, pushing him against the counter.

"Whoa! What the hell?" Roku tried to fight back, trying to put himself upright.

"You saw her!" The girls shouted at the same time.

"Saw who?" Roku pushed against the girls with all his strength, making them take a few steps back.

"Reki!" they shouted in unison.

(PC)...

later

Sitting at our usual table at CafÃ© Kartie, the girls told me everything about Reki. About how she took care of everyone in Old Home. About her past with Hyouko and Abandoned Factory. And most importantly, how they felt about her.

"I seeâ€|" I said to them after they were done talking. "So you all love her a lot, eh?"

"Like our own sister." Nemu said.

"I'm sorry I didn't stop her, but she just disappeared before my eyes." I said.

"It's okay." Rakka said, wiping tears from her eyes. "At the very least, we know that she's doing fine."

The girls sat there in silence, trying to figure out why Reki had returned to Glie. As the minutes passed, a crowd began forming outside of the CafÃ©. Everyone from the elderly to toddlers all tried to take a peek inside, climbing on top of one another.

"Hey! What's going on out there?" The CafÃ© owned asked.

Immediately, the small crowd started to chant my name, demanding that I appear before them.

"Damnâ€|" I sighed to myself, "must be the people who think I'm a God."

"You should try to clear things up with them." Kana suggested. "If they really think you are a God, then they'll listen to your every word."

"Good ideaâ€|" I said, getting up to approach the roaring crowd. "I'll just tell'em to buzz off."

The chanting of my name grew with every step I took toward the entrance. Taking a deep breath, I opened the swivel doors, appearing in front of what seemed to be a crowd of about a hundred cheering people. Each had smiles pasted onto their faces, yelling in ecstasy for me to give a speech.

"_Damnâ€|" I thought to myself.

Taking yet another deep breath, I held my hand in the air, signaling for everyone to quiet down. As soon as no sound could be heard, I spoke.

"Umâ€| I don't really know how to break the news to you allâ€| but, I'm not a God. I'm justâ€| me. A normal Haibane. Basically, what I'm trying to say isâ€| you're all crazyâ€|"

After a few seconds of thinking it over, the crowd burst into laughter.

"Surely he jests!" a man yelled out loud.

"Our God is so modest!" A woman shouted.

Several others yelled out similar phrases at me, making me angrier with every one.

"Stop!" I shouted over the crowd. Almost instantly they quieted down and paid attention. "You people are **CRAZY! **Go away! Leave me alone!"

To my surprise, the crowd fled the scene, leaving me behind standing by myself. As the last person scuttled away, I realized what I had done; sort of a wrath of god.

"_heh...,_" I thought to myself, "_not to shabby..._"

I returned inside and sat back at my place.

"What did you do?" Nemu asked sternly.

"I told them to buzz off." I said, sipping on a glass of water.

"You think it'll work?" Asked Rakka.

"I hope so." I said.

"So where should we go next?" Hikari asked, changing the subject. "I hear there's a sale at the grocery store."

"Yeah, we need to stock up for winter." Nemu said. "But first we'll stop by the bakery and get some bread for tonight."

"Ohâ€|" Hikari said.

"I thought that it was supposed to be a three day holiday?" I said.
"How come a lot of stores are still open?"

"Wellâ€|" Nemu started. "I suppose some people are workaholics. Or maybe it's because their stores are important, and that the town wouldn't operate correctly with them out for a few days. Also, Horton never closes the Thrift store for anything. Not even bad weather or any kind of Holiday."

"I guess you're rightâ€|" I said. "but, why doesn't Horton close the store?"

"Maybe he can't afford to." Kana said. "Mostly us Haibane shop there, so he probably doesn't make much money."

**later**

As our little group entered the bakery an overexcited Dante, fully dressed in his baker's uniform, greeted us.

"Welcome! Welcome!" He said, walking past me and straight over to Hikari. "You're supposed to be off today!"

"Uhâ€| we just needed to pick up a few thingsâ€|" She said.

"Oh! Well then, what can I get you!" He showed her several types of breads and pastries. Hikari looked a little uncomfortable, so I decided to step in and give her a few inches of breathing room.

"What's up man?" I said to him. "No 'hi' for me?"

He spun around quickly in my direction. "Oh, I didn't notice you come in here." He ignored me and went back to Hikari. "So what do you need?" Hikari was clearly uncomfortable with Dante so close to her, invading her personal space.

"Dante!" I called out. "She works here. Don't you think she would know what she was doing?"

"You kidding me?" He said back. "She a girl. And girls need a little help now and then because they forget easily due to their smaller brains and suchâ€|" The others growled as he spoke, offended at his sexist remarks.

"You know what?" Nemu said calmly, trying to suppress her rage. "I think we'll take our business elsewhere." She grabbed Hikari's wrist and dragged her outside. "Come on! Let's go."

Rakka and Kana obeyed her orders and followed her out the door, growling amongst themselves. I on the other hand couldn't help but laugh out loud, earning glares from the girls.

Starting to follow them out the door, I saw Dante standing behind the counter looking down at the ground.

"You okay, man?" I asked him.

"Dammitâ€|" He whispered.

"Look, if you want to impress Hikari, you should, you know, treat her how she would want to be treated."

"Didn't you see me try to help her out?"

"Uh, yeah. But you shouldn't insult her at the same time." I scratched my nose. "I suppose that girls like attention, but not to much. Maybe you were making her feel a little, you knowâ€| helplessâ€| or like she didn't know what she was doing. You should try to make girls feelâ€| I dunnoâ€| wanted? Or maybe special?"

"Then what am I supposed to do?" He looked at me, almost begging me to give him some relationship advice. I myself don't know much anything about dating or the opposite sex, but I tried my best to give him obvious advice.

"I'm not supposed to be doing this, 'cuz it's forbidden and all. But since you're a friendâ€|" I sighed loudly. "Hikari likes flowers. Brightly colored ones. Especially white ones with the yellow stuff in the middle."

"R-really?" he said, wiping his eyes.

"Wellâ€| I don't really know for sure, but she's always picking flowers for the dinner tableâ€| and sometimes she tucks a flower behind her earâ€| "

"Thank you!" He jumped toward me and bear hugged me, wrapping his arms around my torso and squeezing with all his might. Not being able to breathe, I slapped him on the back, trying to get him off.

"Oh!" he released his grip. "Sorry, man. Hey man, you are like the best friend a guy could ever have!" He then grabbed my hand a shook it furiously, causing me to lose my balance. I struggled to stay upright.

"Uhâ€| sureâ€|" I gasped for air.

"Oooh damn, can't wait for Sundayâ€|"

"Sunday?" I choked. "What for?"

"That's when she comes back to work, man!" He said gleefully.

"Uhâ€| maybe you should give her a bit more timeâ€| after what you did and all, I think she'll be a little freaked out. You're relationship with her before was a close one wasn't it? Right now it's probably going down the drainâ€| "

"You think so?" He held his chin in thought. "I got it! I'll wait 'till the end of the year to confess my love for her! Goddammit Roku, you're a freaking genius!"

"What?"

"Dude! The end of the year is like THE most romantic time for couples! And I'm sure that by then she'll have today's little incident erased from her memory! It's perfect!"

"I dunnoâ€|" I said softly. "It might be a little too perfectâ€|"

(PC)...

After his little talk with Dante, Roku rejoined the girls, heading for the grocery store that Hikari had suggested. Inside the gigantic building, the group found that nearly everything was on sale. People everywhere were dashing here and there, trying to acquire everything and anything that they thought they needed. A huge man holding several baskets and wearing a sign on his front and back approached the group, greeting them with his mighty voice.

"Welcome!" he bellowed. "The North District Supermarket is having an 'End of the summer' sale! Everything in the store is seventy-five percent off!"

The girls all gasped loudly, shocked at the giant man's announcement. They all took a basket from the man and went their separate ways, but not before Nemu shouted orders like a Sergeant on a battle field.

"Rakka! Go and get dry foods! Hikari! You get the dairy products! Kana! Get the canned goods! I'll go and get all the good meat! And Roku!"

"I'll uhâ€| go and help Kana." Roku said instinctively.

"Yeah! Help her get some canned foods! Ready! GO!"

As soon as the word "go" was shouted from Nemu's lips, the girls ran to their respective areas to hunt down the best possible products available. Kana took Roku by his arm and dragged him straight to the canned goods aisle, weaving to and fro past a feverish crowd of storming shoppers.

Screeching to a halt in the canned goods section, Kana let go of Roku's arm, bending over to gasp for air.

"What the hell?" Roku gasped. "What's with all the commotion?"

"Wellâ€| Kana spit out. "Since the Toogaâ€| were here yesterdayâ€| that means new stuffâ€| is coming in. And to get rid of all the old stuffâ€| the store is having a saleâ€|"

"So?" Roku said, finally able to catch his breath. "Why'd you have to drag me?"

"Didn't you hear?" Kana shouted. "seventy-five percent off everything in the store! It's a bargain! You of all people should know that we can't possibly pass up an opportunity like this!"

"Whateverâ€| let's just get all the good stuff before we get killedâ€|"

As Kana squeezed between people to reach the shelves, Roku couldn't help but smile to himself. Somehow, being with Kana has lifted everything off his shoulders. Weather it be his nightmares, his issues with the townsfolk, or the mystery of the Tooga, nothing mattered to him at that very moment. Standing in the middle of the aisle made him a target for the oncoming traffic of rushing shoppers, so he decided to step out of the way, bumping into someone in the process.

"Watch it you!" The unfamiliar voice shouted. Roku turned to face an angry looking Haibane girl. She wore a jean-jacket with a lavender sweater underneath and a short, tight fitting skirt. Her hair was tied back in an odd way, giving a look of a modern teenager.

Roku was taken aback, he recognized the clothes styles. He realized that it matched the styles in his dreams. As he took a closer look at the clothes, the girl growled louder, pushing Roku away.

"What's you're problem? Apologize this instant!" She shouted.

"Eh?" Roku snapped out of his inspection, noticing that the girl had

an angry look pasted on her tomato red face. "Oh! Uhâ€| sorry, but you're clothesâ€| they lookâ€|"

"What!" The girl shouted. "Are you trying to make fun of me!" She pulled her fist back, cocking her arm for a mighty punch aimed at Roku's face.

"N-no!" Roku said, shielding himself with the basket. "I wasn't insulting you! It's just that, you're clothes look so familiarâ€|"

"Youâ€| PERVERT!" She took a swing at Roku's face, missing by mere centimeters.

"Whoa! Hey! Stop!" Roku shouted. He dodged every punch that the girl threw, but he didn't know how much long he could last. The punching of the girl and the dodging of Roku continued while shoppers continued to rage on in the background. Obviously nobody thought that fighting was a problem during a hectic sale.

"Hey Roku! Look at this!" Kana said as she dug her way out of a pile of people. "Chocolate, caramel, and vanilla syâ€|rupâ€| what the?" She looked to her left finding nothing but an endless sea of moving bodies. To her right, on the other hand, was Roku, frantically dodging an attacking girl who seemed to be about her own age.
"Roku!"

Kana tackled the girl, pinning her shoulders to the ground.

"What do you think you're doing?" She yelled into the girl's ear.

"He's the one who started it!" The girl yelled back, trying to wiggle free from Kana's grip. "He was leering at me like a dog!"

"What?" Kana shouted. "Why would Roku do that?"

"I was just looking at her clothes!" Roku admitted.

"He's a pervert!" The girl shouted. "PERVER- OW!"

"What's going on here?" Roku heard a familiar voice ask.

From the wall of hoarding people, came Hyouko. He calmly walked over to a dumbfounded Kana, picking her off of the girl and standing both of them up. Roku laughed to himself after seeing both girls go from loud cat-fighters to quiet, obedient puppies in the presence of Hyouko.

"Thereâ€| now what's going on, Midori?" He asked the girl.

"That boy was leering at me!" She shouted, pointing at Roku.

"No way!" Kana countered. "Roku would never do that!"

"I was just looking at her clothes!" Roku admitted once again.

"SHUT UP!" Hyouko shouted. "Now Midoriâ€| this is Roku. He's the newborn friend of mine. He still hasn't met all of us Haibane so he's bound to get a little curious."

"I am not a pet!" Roku said, insulted by Hyouko's words.

"And Roku." Hyouko rubbed his sinuses. "This is Midori. Obviously she's one of us: a Haibane."

Roku nodded toward the girl, earning a glare in return.

"And Kana." Hyouko turned toward her. "Why did you pin Midori down?"

"She was attacking Roku!" Kana yelled. "He only has one arm! How can he defend himself from this bully with only one arm?"

"I could protect myself fine, thank you!" Roku whispered to himself. He was clearly the target of indirect insults.

"Look! this is just a misunderstanding, Midori." Hyouko said. "Now apologize to the newbie!"

"newbie?" Roku whispered.

"Dammit!" Midori said, extending her arm out to Roku. "I'm sorry for attacking you!" Roku received her hand and they both shook.

"And what about me?" Kana said, expecting an apology as well.

"You apologize to Midori for attacking her." Hyouko said sternly.

"What?" Kana said. "Why do I have to apologize?"

Hyouko eyed her angrily, as if he was forcing her to do as he says telepathically.

"FINE!" Kana shouted. She first dropped the cans of syrup into the basket that Roku held. She then extended her hand to Midori, who accepted it. Both squeezed as hard as possible, trying to psyche each other out. "I'm sorry." Kana said through her teeth.

"Good." Hyouko said, putting his arms on both of the girls' shoulders. "We're having a little get together tonight to celebrate Sakura's Day of Flight. You guys over at Old Home should come by later on."

"We'll be there." Nemu said out of nowhere. She approached the group, surprising both Kana and Roku. "We'd love to come by."

(PC)...

on the path toward Old Home

I couldn't help but feel a little confused as we all walked back to Old Home. Confused about the way Kana had obeyed Hyouko's demands, albeit hesitant and angry; The way that girl Midori was so offended about the way I was looking at her clothes; the way that Nemu quickly accepted Hyouko's invitation to a small "get-together" at Abandoned Factory. The latter was more bewildering than the rest because of all

of the negativities that I had heard about the relationship between Nemu and the Haibane at Abandoned Factory. I wanted to ask her personally, but didn't want to offend anyone, so I kept to myself, dragging along as many bags of groceries as I was able to. I stuck up a conversation, trying to end our day of shopping in a more positive note.

"Hey." I started, shifting the two bags of groceries in my arm. "Why do I have to carry two bags?"

"Haven't you ever heard of courtesy?" Hikari chuckled. "You're the man of the house; you have to work harder than the rest of us."

"Well, I understand that partâ€| but why do the two bags have to be full of cans?"

"You expect us girls to carry the heaviest things?" Kana said.

"I thought you said you were as strong as an oxâ€|" I muttered to myself, shifting the bags once again. To gain more stability, I held the bags steady with my chin.

"What'd you say?" Kana asked, poking my sides. "Stop complaining and be a man. Ever heard of the saying 'Ladies first'?"

"Yeahâ€|" I sighed. "Well, since I'm handicappedâ€| doesn't that automatically rule me out?"

"No." The girls said together, smiling as they did so.

*back at Old Home*

As we finished storing all of the groceries, Nemu told us to be ready for the party at Abandoned Factory by seven o'clock. Seeing that it was only four, I decided to head for the southern edge of Glie where I met the Communicator, and use my gun as the Tooga had advised. Since it was the farthest from town, it would be the perfect spot to fire off a few rounds for target practice.

"I'll be back." I told the girls. "I need to do something."

"Okay." Nemu said. "Be back by six."

"Yeah." I answered.

"Let me come with you." Kana said, running to my side.

"Uhâ€| sure." I said, surprised by Kana instantaneous decision. "I'm not doing much though, soâ€|"

"It's okay." She said, putting on a pair of leather gloves. Shrugging my shoulders, I followed her outside to the courtyard. I decided not to argue with her.

"Wait here, I need to get something." I said, running back to my room and retrieving the bag of ammunition that the Tooga had given me. I only took about twelve bullets and pocketed them, not wanting to shoot too many and disturb the town. As I headed downstairs I ran into Rakka, who was carrying a bundle of freshly washed sheets. The

bullets in my pocket found its way out as I fell to the floor, scattering all over the place.

"Oops!" I said, helping Rakka up. "Sorry about that. Kana's waiting for me." I began to pick up the sheets, not wanting them to be too dirty.

"It's okay." She said, picking up the sheets near her. "I should have taken it easy and carry a little bit at a time. Uhâ€| what's this for?" She picked up one of the bullets and examined it closely.

"Uhâ€| nothingâ€|" I snatched the bullet away from her, doing the same with the rest of the bullets on the floor.

"Ohâ€| ok."

After all the bed sheets were picked up from the floor, I helped her store it away in the linen closet down the hall. Afterwards, I apologized once again, and headed downstairs, and outside. In the courtyard, I spied Kana sitting patiently on the well, staring off in the sky.

"What'cha lookin' at?" I asked, standing next to her.

"The birdsâ€|" She said, still looking at the sky.

"You like birds?"

"No." She said smugly, "I'm jealous of them."

"Why?"

"They're the only things allowed in and out of Glie." She stood up and followed me to our nametags.

"Why would you be jealous of that?"

"Idiot." She turned both of our nametags over. "Haven't you ever wondered what's beyond the walls?"

"No." I said as we exited Old Home and walked southward.

"Really?" She asked, "You never even thought about it once?"

"Nope." I said proudly. "Not even a little bit."

"No wayâ€|" She sounded amazed. "You gotta be pulling my leg. Aren't you even a little curious?"

"Well, yeah I'm a little curious about the other side. But I believe that dwelling upon the unknown is a bad habit." I took out a cigarette from my pocket and placed it in my mouth.

"Like smoking?" She said, snatching the cigarette from my mouth.

"Hey!" I tried to take it back, but she ran away. "Come back here! Those are expensive!"

"Not to mention a gross habit as well!" She was now about ten yards away from me and getting farther. I wondered why I was so slow; normally I could easily run faster than Kana. Then it hit me: my missing arm helped me balance, and without it, my legs would have to compensate for the missing weight.

"_Damnâ€_|_" I cursed myself, "Gimmie a break!"

As soon as I slowed to a brisk walk, Kana suddenly stopped. I wondered what had gathered her attention.

"What's wrong?" I asked, finally catching up to her.

"The wallâ€_|_ I've never been this close to it before." She said to me.

I looked in the direction she was staring and saw that we were indeed a few feet from the wall. I thought it strange that I never noticed it as I chased her.

"_Must have been the adrenaline and stuffâ€_|_" I thought to myself, catching my breath.

"So." Kana said, changing the subject.. "What's that thing you need to do?"

"Uhâ€_|_" I hesitated for a little bit before drawing my gun from underneath my shirt.

"Are you really going to use that?"

"I dunnoâ€_|_" I said. "I know the Tooga said I have to practice using itâ€_|_ butâ€_|_ if I do fire itâ€_|_ what if I get better and better with my aim?"

"Uhâ€_|_ hello?" Kana said, knocking on my forehead. "Isn't that the point? To get better with that thing?"

"Yeahâ€_|_" I agreed. "But what If I get bored with shooting at inanimate objectsâ€_|_ what then?"

"Why would you think that way? Are you a bad person?" She asked, with a sarcastic tone in her voice.

"No, I'm not." I said. "But what about how I was... before I came here?"

"Do you remember anything about before?" She motioned for me to sit down on the grass with her.

"Not very clearly." I said, sitting down on the grass. "I remember everything except names of people, their faces...and what I didâ€_|_ but everything else like how to talkâ€_|_"

"Or how to act around certain peopleâ€_|_ how to do the things that you're good atâ€_|_" She continued for me.

"Like shooting a gunâ€_|_" I interrupted.

"... So, you know how to shoot?"

"Yeahâ€| I mean... I think soâ€| but â€| I've had these dreamsâ€| more like nightmares, where I used a gunâ€| on people."

Not knowing what else to say, we sat there together in silence, the gun still in my hand. I thought about the dreams that I was having recently. Every night, something different happens, but it seems as if they were advancing in time, rather than random events, and each time I, or whoever's eyes I was looking through, would have a shorter and shorter temper, angered by the slightest provocation.

Replacing the gun into my holster, I sighed to myself, deciding to go against the Tooga's wishes. I decided not to use my gun under any circumstance, lest I become that horrible monster in my dreams.

(PC)...

later that evening

Roku checked his hair in his bath room, making sure every strand was where it needed to be, and reinforcing the style with hair gel. Satisfied with his spiked hair. Dressed in his evening clothes consisting of his white sneakers, black jeans, and a white dress shirt which was unbuttoned, showing a plain white tanktop underneath. Instead of buckling his holster around his chest, he looped the holster onto his belt, dropping the empty gun in place and shifting the belt around so that the gun lay on his right hip. A while earlier, he decided that he would wear the gun as the Tooga had wished, but refused to fire it.

"_Maybe they'll understandâ€|" He thought as he checked himself in the mirror.

He headed downstairs to meet the girls, who were already dressed in more casual clothing. He noted to himself that this was the first time that he'd seen the girls wear pants, not including of course, Kana.

"Hey." He said, jumping off the final few steps of the staircase.
"You all ready?"

"Yeah." Nemu said. "Let's go." The girls then filed out of the room and out into the courtyard, with me exiting last.

"Hey." Roku said as he closed the door behind me. "What's with the clothes?"

"What do you mean?" Hikari asked, turning over all of our nametags.

"Well, except for Kana, I've never seen any of you wear pants beforeâ€| usually you're all wearing skirts and dresses."

"You expect us to wear dresses in cold weather like this?" Rakka said.

"Hm? Cold weather?" I "felt" the air around me with my hand, noticing for the first time that the air was crisper and had a slight snap to it, it really was cold out. "Huhâ€| I never noticed before. Wasn't it

warmer just a few days ago?"

"The weather here changes fast." Nemu said. "In just a few weeks it'll be snowing, and before you know it, it'll be warm again."

"Maybe time just flows faster here?" Roku suggested.

"It feels that way, doesn't it?"

Nemu stared off into the sky, in deep thought. She remembered the time that she had spent with Reki and Kuramori. The way she had been friends with the Haibane of Abandoned Factory. And that this would be the first time she would be setting foot over there in a long time.

"_Way too long_|_" She thought to herself.

*At Abandoned Factory**

As the group approached Abandoned Factory, it was clear to them that this was no ordinary get-together. Lights were strung up in every possible place, illuminating the entire area. Loud, pulsating music could be heard all around, vibrating the ground, and rattling the gates with every beat. Past the sounds of the music, Roku heard the chatter of people. He couldn't tell how many, but he estimated it to be at least one hundred.

"Uh_| maybe we came on the wrong night?" Hikari said. She looked a little worried.

"Eh?" Roku said. "You scared?"

"What?" Hikari sounded offended. "Scared of what?"

"Nothing." Roku said, opening the gates.

"Hey_|" Rakka said. "Those gates are usually locked."

"Why would they lock it if they're having a party?" Roku asked.

"True_|, but normally we would have to enter through there." She pointed to a portion of the fence that was cut open.

Shrugging it off, Roku opened the gates, allowing the girls to enter first. As he followed them inside, they were greeted by several Haibane, all of whom Roku did not know.

"Welcome!" A Haibane said to them. "Come on in! Help yourself to all the food you want!"

As Roku and the girls were inside the north most building. Inside, they took a good look around, noticing that not only were all the Haibane here, but also people from town. A closer inspection noted that everyone was about the same age as Roku, hinting that this was indeed a house party, and not a get together.

Dozens of people were dancing on a makeshift dance floor in the center of the room, going along with the quick, deep beats that a DJ

was playing in the back. A thin layer of tobacco smoke filled the room, allowing beams of lights wave to and fro across the room, controlled by hyperactive girls near the dance floor. To the far left side was a table filled to the edge with various kinds of bite sized pieces of meats, breads and cheeses, as well as a gigantic bowl of fruit. Next to the table were several barrels with taps on the front, giving away the fact that it was filled with an unknown type of drink. To the far right of the girls were dozens, maybe even hundreds of people, chatting away as they cradled glasses and plates on their hands.

"What is this?" Nemu demanded an answer from the Haibane that led them to the table.

"What's it look like?" The boy said. "It's a party, man!"

"Damnâ€|" Nemu said under her breath. "I knew Hyouko understated that this was going to be 'little'â€|"

"So?" Roku said. "What's wrong with a big party now and then?"

"You shouldn't be one to talk." Nemu said, pointing a finger in his face. "Damnâ€| we might as well stay and mingle a little bit. We're going to have to sooner or later, and we might as well make it nowâ€|"

"Hehâ€|" Roku chuckled nervously.

As they reached the table, the girls filled their plates with whatever looked good to eat. Standing near the exit, the girls quietly ate their food, leaving Roku lost and bewildered, staring at them like a traffic accident.

"What?" Nemu asked him.

"This is not what you do at a partyâ€|" Roku said, scratching his head. "Come onâ€| loosen up a little. Dance. Go talk to people."

"I prefer to stick to my own methods, thank you very much."

"Aw, come on Nemu. Don't be that way." A familiar voice interrupted them.

Hyouko approached the girls, greeting each of them warmly.

"I'm glad you could make it. How's everything so far? Need anything?"

"Um.. no, we're fine." Hikari pointed out.

"Yeah, we're good for now." Nemu added.

Satisfied that his guests were pleased, Hyouko turn to Roku.

"Hey, man, there's some guys that want to meet you." He said.

"Yeah?" Roku said, surprised that he actually gained some attention from strangers. "Who?"

"They're the Haibane that live here with me. Ever since I told them about you, they always wanted to meet with you, and what a better time than now, right?"

"Yeah, let's go then." Roku said enthusiastically.

"Come on, I'll lead you to them."

"I'm going too." Kana said, holding on to Roku's arm just as he and Hyouko began to walk away.

"Sure." Hyouko said. "I doubt that you know them, but hey, we're all friends, right?"

Nemu stood there with Rakka and Hikari, watching Kana and Roku disappear into the crowd. She muttered several choice words under her breath, cursing herself for coming here in the first place.

"Nemu?" Rakka asked. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing." Nemu said.

"Come on, Nemu." Hikari said to her. "Let's go walk around a bit. We rarely have a chance to be around lots of people anyways."

"Yeahâ€| you're rightâ€|" Nemu took in a deep breath. "The past is the past, after allâ€|"

(PC)...

Hyouko lead us past dozens of people until we finally reached a place in the corner of the room. There stood eight male Haibane, each had a wide grin pasted on their unshaven faces.

"Guys, this is the dude I've been telling you about. His name's Roku." Hyouko said as he shoved me into their direction. "Roku, these are the guys. Guys, this is Roku."

"I think we get it." One of the young Haibane men said. "Hey, it's nice to finally put a face on this 'dude' that Hyouko's been telling us about." He extended his hand out toward mine, which I received and shook firmly.

"Huhâ€| Hyouko's never mentioned about you guys before." I said. "What's up with that, man?" We stared at him as he blushed.

"Wellâ€| uhâ€| OH! Hey, here comes Midori!" Hyouko changed the subject.

Midori walked over to where we were standing. She was dressed casually in a sort of black nylon windbreaker, and tight fitting blue jeans. As she drew closer, the warm expression on her face slowly morphed into a bitter one. I noticed that Kana had the same look on her face as well. Midori then stopped a few feet away, not wanting to come any closer.

"What's up with those two?" Another Haibane asked me.

"They were fighting earlierâ€|" I said. I took hold of Kana's shoulder. "It's not good to dwell on the past, Kana. You should be

the big woman and admit your faults, as well as hers."

I felt Kana grinding her teeth together, almost as if she were trying everything to stop herself from talking back. I sighed in relief as her shoulders went limp. She turned to face me, forcing a smile on herself.

"I really hate it when you're right!" She sighed loudly.
"Fine!"

She turned around and walked over to where Midori stood. I started to follow, but was held back by Hyouko.

"Let them figure things out." Hyouko said.

We all stood there as we watched the drama unfold. Kana was the first to speak. I couldn't tell what she was saying, since the music in the background was loud enough to drown out her voice, but I could tell from Midori's reaction that things were going well. After a few more moments of the two girls talking back and forth, Kana went to me and punched my shoulder.

"Uh! what was that for?" I said, rubbing the pain away.

"Nothing." She smiled. "Midori's going to introduce me to the rest of the girls. I'll see you in a little bit."

"Uh! ok!"

As I watched the two girls disappear into the crowd, I couldn't help but feel that I did a job well done.

"Damn! I wanted to see a cat fight." One of the guys said to me.
"Is Kana you're girlfriend or something?"

My face turned red.

"What? Wh-what do you mean by that?"

"Man, I could tell!" The Haibane said. "She's totally into you, man."

"Really?"

"Yeah, man." They all chimed in.

I scratched the back of my head, as I didn't know how else to respond.

"Um! did you lose you're arm or something?" A Haibane asked out of the blue.

I shook my head, surprised at the sudden..., and rather stupid question. I thought of a witty remark.

"No, I'm hiding it!" I said. I felt welcomed as the group laughed at my little joke.

(PC)...

later

Nemu, Rakka and Hikari walked around Abandoned Factory. Nemu wanted to see what had or hadn't changed since the last time she was there. On the other hand, this was Hikari's first time to see the inside of Abandoned Factory, so Nemu was also acting a guide.

As they walked, several people overheard Nemu describing how the way things were before and became interested. They followed her along, forming a small tour group, walking in and out of several buildings, listening closely as Nemu described what she used to do here and there, and how it used to look like.

As was well until Hikari felt a strong foreboding feeling. A chill went up her spine, yet she didn't know what was causing it.

Nemu noticed that Hikari was not looking well, so she confronted her.

"What's wrong?" Nemu asked.

"I dunnoâ€|" Hikari looked around. "there's somethingâ€| -"

"HIKARI!" A familiar voice shouted, interrupting her. "I didn't even know you were invited!"

Dante came rushing from out of nowhere and into Hikari's face.

"Did you eat? Did you drink? You want me to get you something?" Dante pummeled her with question left and right.

"Dante!" Hikari shouted. "Did you read my letter?"

"Oh!" Dante said. "I was so excited that you wrote to me, that I didn't even bother reading it!"

Hikari's eye grew wide.

"Nemuâ€|" she started. "Let's go."

"What? Now?" Nemu asked.

"Yeah! The party just started!" Dante agreed.

"Iâ€| don't feel too good." Hikari said. "I need to go home and rest."

"Well you could rest here!" Dante suggested.

"No." Hikari said sternly, grabbing Nemu and Rakka by their arms. "I need to go home."

She started to run, dragging Nemu and Rakka along, and disappearing into the crowd.

(PC)...

back to Roku

"â€| And then she was all like 'Wow! A Haibane!'" I was telling the

group of guys a story. "And then I got pissed and all that, so I stared her directly into her eyesâ€|" I paused to take a sip from his mug full of frothy beer.

"And then?" A Haibane who was standing next to Hyouko asked.

"Well, after a few seconds of that I started drooling and barking like mad!" The group burst into laughter. "She literally jumped up and ran away!"

"Man, that's classic!" another Haibane commented. "Heheheh, too bad you were born over at Old Home. Had you been born over here, we could have done so many fun thingsâ€|"

"Yeah man." Another Haibane chimed in. "You're like, the only dude that we know of that was born over there."

"What?" I asked.

"Not to mention that you dress differently than the girls." Another Haibane said.

"What do you mean?" I asked. "You mean I look funny, or something?"

"No, man. What I'm saying is that the girls dress funnyâ€| wearing old people's clothes and stuff. You, on the other hand, are up with the times, man, while they're still back in the old shitty days."

"You makin' fun of the girls?" I said as I dropped my beer and stepped up to him, grabbing his shirt collar; pulling him closer to me.

"Uhâ€| no man, I was just pointing it out." He took a step back.

"Hey hey heyâ€|" Hyouko butted in, "Let's not start a fight here, eh? Come on, the party's just started; let's not end it early, alright?" He offered another mug of beer to me.

I couldn't help but stare down at the Haibane that insulted the girls. Not once during our stare down did I ever blink; I wanted to see if I could analyze him. Not feeling anything negative, I finally backed down, letting go of his shirt collar.

Taking the mug from Hyouko, I gulped the entire contents.

"See?" Hyouko said. "Now lets just be friends again."

The Haibane that insulted the girls took a deep breath and extended his hand toward me.

"Uhâ€| listen man, I uhâ€|. Didn't mean anything by what I saidâ€| I was just pointing something out, that's allâ€|" He chuckled nervously.

"Hehâ€|" I snorted. "Yeahâ€| that's okayâ€| sorry about the shirt thingâ€|" I received his hand and shook. Unexpectedly, the group began laughing.

"Awwwâ€| that's so cuuute!" A Haibane said.

I smiled, feeling accepted into their little circle of friends. Feeling a bit anxious, I took a cigarette from my pocket and lit it, impressing the guys with my lighting technique.

"Man, I still don't know how you do that." Hyouko grumbled.

"Heh." I puffed on my cigarette. "Here lemmie show youâ€|" I started to hand him my lighter when a familiar voice called out for me.

"Roku!" It was Hikari.

"Hmm?" I turned and spotted her, along with Rakka, Nemu and Kana. "What's wrong?"

"Let's go home!" Hikari yelled at me.

"Woahâ€| calm down!" I said.

"No! We have to go now!"

"What's the matter with you?" I asked, still not understanding her problem.

"It's Dante!" She gasped.

"What? He's here? Where?" I asked looking around. "Did you invite him, man?" I asked Hyouko.

"No, man. I tried to contact him these past few days, but I couldn't find him." He answered.

"Huhâ€| what's he doing? Did he hurt you or anything?" I asked Hikari.

"No, I'm fine, but we have to go now!" She yanked at my shirt.

"Ok ok ok!" I said, regaining my balance. "Uhâ€| I'll see you guys later then?"

"Uh, yeahâ€|" Hyouko said.

With that, Hikari quickly lead Rakka, Nemu, Kana and I to the exit, weaving through the partying crowd as we did so.

*Later, on the dirt path toward Old Home**

The white glow of the full moon above lit our path as we trudged back home. I felt a little disappointed that I couldn't stay at Hyouko's party long enough to get to know my new friends a more, but Hikari's somewhat desperate plea to leave was unavoidable. She walked in between Nemu and Rakka, while Kana and I trailed behind a few steps.

"Hey, Hikari?" I asked, breaking the mid-night silence that had surrounded us. "What is it with you and Dante, anyways?"

"That's none of you're business." She answered bluntly. I was taken aback by her straightforwardness; she had never used that tone of voice before.

"What if it is?" I snapped back. "Just tell me what's wrong. Maybe I can help a little."

"Lookâ€| This has nothing to do with you!" She growled.

"Bullshitâ€|" I responded, spitting to the ground. "This **is** my business. Now tell me, goddammit!"

"Oh?" She stopped and turned to face me. "And how exactly is this YOUR problem? You think that just because you're a guy, you can just start demanding things from me?"

"Stop it you twoâ€|" Nemu tried to intervene.

"Stay out of this." I pointed out to Nemu. "Every time anyone mentions Dante, you get all weird, and whenever Dante's' around you, he starts actin' all ga-ga. And a few days ago, you asked me to give him a letterâ€| what is this, some sort of secret relationship between you two?"

As the last words exited my mouth, Hikari responded with her palm planted square on my face. The unexpected force of her slap made my head turn a full ninety degrees. As I sighed to myself, trying not to make any sudden movements, I turned to face her once again.

"There's no way in hell that he and I are together." She whispered. "Not in a million years. Not when hell freezes over. I'd rather die than fall for himâ€|"

"Then tell me what it is." I said calmly. "I can help."

The other girls around us held their jaws from falling to the ground. From the corner of my eyes, I could tell that they were all shocked at the violence that Hikari had just demonstrated, and I wouldn't blame them. We had never seen her act this way before.

"Okayâ€|", She finally spoke; her head hung low in shame. Her posture was that of a sad puppy, ashamed of itself; making it's master feel sorry for it.

"Okayâ€|" Roku whispered as he helped her up, "okayâ€|"

end chapter eight

* * *

>disclaimer: with the exception of Roku, Gordon, Magdalene, Naota and the names "Horton" for the old clothes dealer, and "Dante" for the assistant baker, I do not own any characters that have made an appearance in the story. I did this for fun, not for money. If you own these characters, please don't sue me. Please don't ruin my fun. Also, if you wish to paste this onto your site, please ask permission first and give credit where credit's due.

9. severed

Note#1: Wowzers! Sorry for the long delay, but school IS importantâ€| isn't it? Anywaysâ€|

_Note#2 : I had typed up chapter 9 back in May, and was fully intending on uploading it... but I lost the disk. After a while of searching, I simply... forgot about this. _

_That is until bluezenith and KOA submitted reviews back in November. Thanks guys.

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**chapter nine: severed**

The sound of birds chirping filled the room with its chorus of post-winter vibes. The weather was warming up noticeably fast, Hikari had noted to herself. It had only been a week since Reki had gone, and already the snow had melted away, only leaving behind a few patches of white ice here and there. In no time at all, it would be summer.

"Though, that's how things work here, isn't it?" She said loudly to herself. "I wonder when my day will come." She stretched her arms out before her, groaning a little to let out the last portions of her sleep from within. "Bahâ€| it's bad to think so much early in the morning."

Filled with the aura and sounds of nature, she pulled herself from under her covers and sat at the edge of her bed, pausing for a moment to glance out the window across the room. Then, realizing how blurry everything was, she took her glasses from her bedside table and placed them on the tip of her nose.

"I hate these thingsâ€|" She commented to herself, "Such a hassle to put them on everydayâ€| I guess it's worth it, if I can have a view like this everyday."

After blinking a few times to adjust her eyes, she glanced at the window once more; this time seeing the outside world in all its glory. She then walked over to the window, wanting to get a better look at the day ahead of her.

"_Beautifulâ€|_" She thought to herself. "_I wonder if it was always like this_."

The ground below was soaked with melted ice, giving the normally light brown dirt a richer, earthier tone. As expected, a few patches of ice were found near the buildings, well, and random places here and there. The trees, still empty of leaves, waved back and forth in the cool winter air, as if to acknowledge Hikari's presence. A few birds flew about the trees, finding the best branches to build the nest for spring.

"That's a sure signal of spring."

Dressed in her normal white blouse with brown skirt, Hikari stood in front of her mirror located to the right of her bed. After cleaning her face with a wet cloth, she began to tie her hair in her signature ponytail, pausing for a moment to gaze at the mirror.

"_Time for a small change._" She said to herself, still holding her hair up.

She untied her hair and let it fall to her shoulders. Brushing it down a bit, she noticed how different she looked without the ponytail. Not only did it cover a bit more of her head, but it also caused her to pay more attention to her face, rather than elsewhere.

"Change is good." She told herself. "And it'll save me a few minutes every morning."

She tossed the ties onto her bed and exited the room, heading for the guestroom to get breakfast started.

**_later_*

As everyone gathered around the dining table in the guestroom, not a single person said a word while Hikari served a breakfast of warm muffins and tea. The girls noticed something different about Hikari, most noticeably her hair. Everyone except for Kana that is, as she was busy gulping down her second cup of tea, and working on her third muffin. As soon as everything was set, Hikari sat down at her place, poured herself a cup of tea, and began nibbling on her muffin.

"Soâ€|" Nemu started. "What's up, Hikari?"

"What?" Hikari asked.

"You're hair." Nemu retorted, pointing to her own head.

"Ohâ€|" Hikari reacted by combing her fingers through her hair.
"Nothing. I was just a little lazy this morning."

"Lazy?" Kana nearly choked on her tea. "You? Lazy? No wonder the snow is melting so soonâ€|" She said in a sarcastic tone.

"I think it looks nice." Rakka said. "Maybe I should grow my hair out."

"I thought it was time for a small change." Hikari said. "We can't stay the same forever, you know."

With that said, the room became silent. Everyone instantly remembered that Reki was gone, and that that was the single biggest change in Old Home. The caretaker of the small feathers was gone, and now somebody had to be the replacement. The house mother was growing old, and they all knew she wouldn't be around forever.

"We should take turns and take time off from work until they arrive." Nemu said, reading the girls' minds and referring to the new eggs found in an empty room in the west wing of Old Home. "We'll make one

of them take care of the little ones."

"That's mean." Rakka said. "Making one of the newborns take care of so many children. What if they aren't as big as us, just like Kuu was? What then?"

"Well they'll get jobs, and one of us'll have to take care of the brats." Kana chimed in. "Not me, of course."

"No." Hikari said. "Our duty is of taking care of the kids, and we all should have an equal chance to do so."

"Aww manâ€|" Kana groaned, and planting her chin on the table.

"Don't complain." Nemu stated, "Besides, they seem to like you more than any of us."

"â€|which happens to be the main problem." Kana added.

"Well, anyways, whose turn is it to watch them today?" Rakka asked.

"Ironically it's Kana's turn." Hikari said, pointing to a calendar on the wall in front of her. On it were several notes, obviously left by each girl due to the differences in penmanship.

"Aww manâ€|" Kana groaned even louder. She retrieved her pocket watch and opened it to check the time. "Onlyâ€| eight more hours to goâ€|" She tilted her head so that she was face-down on the table.

"'Till what?" Rakka asked.

"'Till you guys come home from workâ€|"

"Oh!" Hikari glanced at Kana's watched and saw the time. "I'm late for work!"

"What?" Nemu said. "I thought you go to work a little later?"

"Yeah, but since I have to take some days off to watch the small feathers, I have to go to work a little earlier to make up for it." She stood from her chair and dashed out of the room. "Have a good day, you guys." She managed to shout back.

"Yeah, yeahâ€|" Kana replied, still face-down on the table.

later at the Bakery

Hikari busied herself by taking inventory of bread making ingredients that were stored in the back room. Since the baker and his apprentice, Dante, were already making the day's bread, and since the baker's wife was watching the store, she thought it would be a good idea to make sure they had enough supplies until the next shipment of goods from the local farms, or the Tooga. She took the inventory clipboard from the front counter of the shop, and walked to the other end of the building and into a large room carved out of stone. Entering to room, she immediately began taking inventory.

As she finished with the items stored in boxes on the floor, she

climbed a stepping stool to count items that were found on the top shelves.

"Woah!" she yelped, balancing herself on the rickety stool. She danced around on the stool for nearly a minute until someone from behind secured the stool to the floor by holding it down.

"You okay?" Dante asked, looking up at Hikari.

"Yeah." She smiled. "Thank you." Now stable, she began to take inventory.

"Umâ€œ|" Dante started.

"Yes?"

"Thanks for the bell-nut you gave me a few days ago."

Hikari thought for a moment, recalling the people she had given bell-nuts to on the End of the year festival.

"Oh, yes, I remember now." She said, going back to work. "It was no problem."

"You knowâ€œ| It really meant a lot to meâ€œ|thanksâ€œ|" He blushed as he said this.

"You're welcome." She said, still minding her own work.

Dante, on the other hand, continued to observe her. He noticed that there was something odd about her today.

"Your hairâ€œ|" He began, "You're not wearing it up today."

"Wellâ€œ|" Hikari chuckled, "I was a little lazy today. Besides, I think it's more fitting for me, don't you agree?" She smiled to herself.

"Uhâ€œ|" Dante had a look of disgust on his face. "I think you look better with your hair up."

"Wellâ€œ|" She said as she climbed down the stool, "Get used to it. It saved me a few minutes this morning, and I need that time to take care of the new Haibane that are to be born in a while." Still with her nose buried in her clipboard, she walked over to the opposite end of the storeroom, ready to take inventory of anything she happened to miss.

As she worked, she heard the door slowly creaking until it was closed. She turned around to see Dante locking the door, pocketing the key.

"What's this about?" She asked nervously.

Dante ignore her and advanced onto her. With his face emotionless, his breathing became increasingly loud; pounding at Hikari's head with every breath.

"This isn't funny, Dante!" She screamed, though she knew nothing could be heard from inside the store room.

She cowered in the corner and began crying. "Why?"

Not saying a word, Dante continued to advance until he stood above her. With a grunt, he grabbed her arms. Instantly Hikari began to fight back; she kicked and screamed but to no avail.

Dante would not let go.

* * *

>"**HE WHAT**!" Roku stood from his chair, his fist curled into a ball so tight that a trickle of blood rounded the back of his hand, gathering into a droplet and falling to the floor. "How long has he been doing this?"

Hikari, still sitting on Roku's bed, did not bother to look up at anyone. She was embarrassed, no, frightened that the other would shun and shame her for not reporting anything.

"That wasâ€| the only time." She whispered.

"And you never told anyone?" Nemu asked camly.

Hikari shook her head.

"**YOU GOTTA BE KIDDING ME**!" Roku slammed his fist onto the soft mattress, effectively making whoever was on the bed bounce up and down for a few seconds.

"Roku, calm down." Nemu sternly commanded.

"**NO**!" Roku screamed back, "This sort of thing will **NOT** be tolerated, especially with me around!"

The young man stomped out the door as Rakka and Kana gave chase, leaving behind a sobbing Hikari, and Nemu, who was desperately trying to calm things downâ€|

(PC)â€|

"_I CAN'T BELIEVE THIS, GODDAMMIT!" _I kicked open the door to the courtyard and jogged to my scooter. _"You're going to regret this ever happened, Dante!"_

Behind me were the sounds of footsteps and heavy breathing. I also noticed the faint sound of screaming and pleading; though I didn't pay any attention; my mind was dead, my body numb. I was ready for a conflict.

I pulled my scooter out of its parking space and started the engine. I was ready to leap forward with all the power that the scooter could provide, when a hand reached down and killed the engine. Irritated, I turned to my right, ready to punch the living daylight out of whoever owned the hand, only to stop myself at the very last possible second.

I froze in horror, as did Kana, whose eyes were filled with tears. The backside of my fist was mere centimeters from the side of her head.

"So is this you're answer to everything?" She sobbed.

I didn't know what to say.

"Roku, pleaseâ€|" Rakka chirped from behind Kana, "We can talk things over with Dante."

"Noâ€|" I softly breathed out, "Talking won't workâ€|"

Reluctantly, I brished Kana's arm away and restarted the scooter.

"â€|you shouldn't follow meâ€|" I warned, know full well that they intend to do so.

I opened the throttle as far as it could go, and sped away from the dimly lit Old Home.

(PC)â€|

About 30 minutes laterâ€|

As the hours slowly crept toward dawn, the party at Abandoned Factory started to cool down. The number of people attending was still relatively large, but the majority of the attendees were ready to leave.

Then, in a flash, Roku drove his scooter straight through the iron fence. Like hell on wheels, he sped his way past weary guests, nearly running several over as he charged past.

He then jumped off his scooter, not bothering to slow down a single bit, and ran with the inertia that carried him. Not blinking even once, his vision around him blurred, only allowing him to see his target straight ahead.

"DANTE!" He yelled, as he slowed to a quick trot, shoving tired party goes out of his way.

Dante, who was with Hyouko and his group of friends, wearily looked up and spotted a furious one armed boy, charging at him.

"Rokuâ€|?" He pondered aloud, "What's up with him?" He asked Hyouko.

"Beats me." Hyouko responded.

Without warning, Roku stepped up to Dante, pulled his arm back, and focused his entire weight into his fist. The impact was so sudden, so strong, that Dante jumped back and fell onto a table full of various bottles and spirits.

"Whoa!" Hyouko gasped, witnessing probably the first act of any kind of violence in Glie history.

Whit a bit of effort and a grunt, Dante lifted his throbbing head to face Roku.

"The hell was that for?" He coughed out.

"Don't bullshit me." Roku growled. "The Communicator is gonna hear about this!"

"About what?" Dante forced himself up; the adrenaline pumping through his veins finally began to work. "About you punching me in the face without any kind of warning?"

"Noâ€|" Roku stood firm, "About you and what you did to Hikari!"

Dante's eyes grew wide with fear. A crowd began to form and encircle Roku and Dante, most of them out of curiosity, but all of them for entertainment and to keep their party high going.

"You can't prove anything!" He shouted. "She's lying!"

"I beg to differ." A voice only known to the Haibane spoke out.

"What?" Dante wiped his bloody nose with his arm.

Behind Roku, the crowd began to split down the middle, as if the parting of the Red Sea was being re-enacted by the party goers. A gray shadowy figure silently crept forward; behind him an entourage of young girls, a gruff and burly man, and an elderly man.

"pssst!" a sound was heard behind The Communicator.

"Nemu? Pops?" Roku turned to see the Girls of Old Home behind the Communicator. "What are you doing here?"

"We came to get you." Rakka whispered, "Now please, get over here." She cowered as she remembered that she was in the presence of the Communicator.

"Do as she says." The Communicator commanded.

Roku was hesitant. He still had unfinished business with Dante, but he couldn't disobey the Communicator. Like a defeated stray, Roku unwillingly went to join the girls.

"You." The Communicator pointed at Dante. "You are of ageâ€| you know the rules of this townâ€| now explain yourselfâ€|"

"I have nothing to explain because I DIDN'T DO A GODDAMNED THING!" Dante yelled.

"I see." The Communicator turned and ushered in an old man. "I believe the Mayor has something to say."

"Mayor?" Dante whispered to himself.

"Ahem." The Mayor cleared his throat, "I am sorry, Mr. Freeman, but I cannot allow such an act to go unpunished."

"Ridiculous!" Dante shouted, "I've done nothing wrong!"

"The evidence mounts against you, Mr. Freemanâ€|" The Mayor shook his head, as if he were ashamed of Dante, "You are to be placed under

house arrest for 5 years, or to serve Gate-keeper duty for 1 year. The choice will be-

"**HOUSE ARREST, GODDAMMIT!**" roared Pops, "**DANTE YOU GET YOUR ASS BACK HOME THIS INSTANT! I NEVER RAISED YOU LIKE THIS, YOU SON OF A BITCH!**"

A wave of shocked faces spread amongst the crowd. The unruly behavior of Pops was never seen before, at least, not in public.

"Dadâ€| Iâ€|" Dante was left with nothing but mumbles in his mouth. Defeated, he shuffled through the crowd, but not before being dragged away like a puppy by a demonized Pops.

Moments seemed like hours as time passed, and not a single word was said, nor a sound made.

(PC)â€|

The walk home seemed to drag on forever. Every time I would look to see where Old Home was in the distance, it was as if we were not only walking backwards, but as though Old Home were rolling away from us.

The early morning sun had barely begun to peak above the hills when the sounds of flocks of geese was heard from above. Like black specks painted against a canvas of harsh grays and a bit of orange from the east, I watched the geese float through the air, eventually leaving the early horizon better known as "The Wall".

I sighed to myself while reaching into my pocket for a cigarette.

"I'm sorry." I said, placing the white cylinder between my lips. "I'm sorry for the way I acted earlier. I guess my emotions got a hold of my common senseâ€| and I went berserkâ€|"

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Nemu gently elbowing Hikari, as if cueing her to respond.

"I'mâ€|" Hikari began, "I'm sorry as well. Something as serious as thisâ€| ."

"Stop." I said, not bothering to turn to face her. "That's enough. There's no use dawdling in the past like that; it's over now."

I could feel the tense atmosphere become heavier as I said that, so I wanted to lighten things up a bit.

"Sayâ€|" I turned to face Rakka, "What's for breakfast?"

* * *

>disclaimer: with the exception of Roku, Gordon, Magdalene, Naota and the names "Horton" for the old clothes dealer, and "Dante" for the assistant baker, I do not own any characters that have made an appearance in the story. I did this for fun, not for money. If you own these characters, please don't sue me. Please don't ruin my fun. Also, if you wish to paste this onto your site, please ask permission first and give credit where credit's due.

10. moving on

Note: Short chapter, I know, butâ€œ I feel all lovey-dovey insideâ€œ .

Note2: Jeeze this site changed formats AGAIN? Anyways, to those of you continuing this story without re-reading the past chapters (PC)â€œ means a perspective change. I'll have to come up with something better than that for my next update. Any suggestions would be nice... anyways, enjoy this chapter. Less hate. More LUV.

>

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* * *

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_**chapter ten: moving on...
> _

Their simple breakfast of eggs, toast and tea felt like a meal fit for a king to Roku. It was as if he became a new man overnight. His little charade earlier this morning was no doubt violent, but it had established that he was, as the Tooga commanded, the guardian of any and all Haibane living in Glie.

He happily ate his meal; a somewhat stupid looking smile pasted on his face as he did so. The girls, with the exception of Hikari, did the same; knowing full well why Roku was shining.

"Hikari," Roku spoke, noticing Hikari's look of concern, "there's nothing to worry about anymore."

"I know." Hikari responded, sipping on her tea, "I'm justâ€œ grateful for what you did."

"I'd do the same for any one of you." Roku said, "It's my responsibility."

"Well, 'Mr. Responsible', " Nemu joked, "I think it's time for us to take a quick nap while you do the dishes."

"Yes 'um," Roku joked back, "and I think I'll hit the sack later on as wellâ€œ long night last night."

The girls agreed, leaving their seats and Roku alone to clean up.

**Later**

After finishing washing the dishes, Roku stepped outside to take a cigarette break before going to bed. He set himself next to the old well in the center of the courtyard, resting his back against the gray bricks. His wings ached, but he fully ignored them, blissfully soaking in the tobacco, the morning sun, the damp air, and the cool atmosphere all at the same time.

He had accomplished something great earlier. Something he was destined to do for the rest of his stay in Glieâ€|

(PC)â€|

I woke a little later that day, still lying next to the well in the courtyard. Judging by the position of the sun, it was probably late to mid-afternoon.

There was no strange dream, this time, but instead I dreamed the image of a girl dressed in brown. I couldn't quite put my finger on who exactly that girl was, but she felt so familiarâ€| so close to meâ€|.

I shook my head, "No use thinking about lost causesâ€|" I whispered to myself.

I was still a little too lazy to get up from my makeshift bed, so I stretched out a bit, making myself more comfortable.

"I should make this my new bed." I said, pulling out my pack of cigarettes. A sudden shock went through my body as I froze in horror; I was out of smokes. "Awww gawdammitâ€|"

**later**

Since there was still plenty of sunlight out, I decided to walk to town, instead of riding my scooter. And it was certainly worth my while.

The trees were in the beginning stages of metamorphosis. Their normally green leaves were slowly melting away into yellow and red spots. The remnants of geese were overhead, catching up with the rest of their flock, which were no doubt already well ahead of them. Some small bird were heard chirping in the forest, but I knew that wouldn't last. Fall was coming.

The hustle and bustle of yesterday was gone. There weren't as many people wandering about in town, and whoever was outside was busy minding to themselves.

Some cafes were still open, with customers sitting idly, most likely just waiting for the day to end. The small talk from each person that I overheard while passing by was nothing more than that. No news of last nights events. No news of Dante's house arrest. Nothing about me.

I sighed with relief; it was the last thing I wanted to hear.

Entering the tobacco shop across the street from Pops garage, I browsed through the newest shipment of tobacco from the Tooga. The shopkeeper eyed me, probably still wary of the last time we met.

"Mmmay I help you?" he queried. "We currently have a stock of tobacco from the far east, if you are interestedâ€|"

"Sounds great," I said, walking toward the counter. "What's your opinion of it?"

His eyes suddenly shined, and his ear turned a bright red. Probably excited to hear that I might be a potential connoisseur.

"Well!" he exclaimed, reaching under the counter and withdrawing a bag full of brown, crushed leaves, "This particular mixture begins with a slight cinnamonâ€| zing to it. After an exhale, the after-taste of sweet chocolate and mint is left in your palate."

"Wowâ€| I reeled, "Kind ofâ€| complex."

"Hmmm?" He returned the bag and retrieved another. "This mixture is a light vanilla mix. The subtle-ness of vanilla and sugar is an excellent way to end a meal."

"Actuallyâ€| I said, a little overwhelmed at the selection, "I was looking for anâ€| everyday type of smoke. You knowâ€| something that can be used for any occasion?" I thought for a second, as did the shopkeeper, "Something that a person who dislikes smoking wouldn't mind." The thought of Kana entered my mind. I knew she hated my habit, but maybe there was something that would make it a little more tolerable.

He returned the bag and brought out a carton of menthol cigarettes. The word "Magic 3" were printed on its face in elaborate calligraphy.

"I like these." He said happily, albeit bluntly.

As I returned outside with my purchases, I placed a new cigarette in my mouth and lit it. My senses finally calmed, I walked over to Pops garage, curious to see if anyone was there.

To my surprise, Hyouko was inside, sweeping the floor with Naota. I extinguished my cigarette and entered the shop.

"Hey guys," I said cheerfully, "I thought we didn't have work 'till Monday?"

"Nah, I'm just here because I feel responsible for last night." Hyouko said.

"What?" I asked, putting my bag on the counter, "If anything, it was all MY fault."

"Nah, man." Hyouko tossed me a broom, "The party. Dante wasn't supposed to drink."

"Ohâ€| so why you giving me a broom?"

"You're helping out!" Naota chimed in."

I rubbed his black hair, turning what was once a fine combed head of hair, into a mop.

"Little bratâ€| I said as I began to sweep, "So where's Pops?"

"â€|umâ€| Naota began, "He's over at the mayor's house, signing

papers an' stuff."

"Ohâ€|" I recalled Pop's actions last night, "I'mâ€| sorry, Naota."

"For?" he asked.

"It's my fault that your older brother is being locked up."

"Don't worry about it, it isn't your fault." Naota said, "He brought it upon himself."

"That's a very mature thing for you to say, son." A voice said from the doorway, "That's good."

Pops entered the shop, removing his derby hat as he did so. He was dressed in a black suit and tie, with a black trench coat on top.

"Don't be like your brother." He ushered in Dante; a stone cold emotion painted on his face. Right behind him was a armored guard; no doubt his personal officer from now on.

Unlike Hyouko and Naota, I faced Dante and made eye contact. His presence angered me to no end, but I was smart enough to realize that doing anything would land me in the same position.

For some reason, the thought of Dante harassing, not only Hikari, but all the other femal Haibane rushed through my mind. The particular image of Dante with Kana stuck to me; infuriated me.

I lifted my chin a bit, to show my superiority, and also to intimidate him. No reaction came from the broken man. I knew he was angry inside, and I knew he wanted to attack me; but the guard behind him was more intimidating than me.

He was quickly ushered away into the backroom.

After the guard and Dante were gone, I faced Pops.

"I-." I began, but was interrupted by a gigantic finger pushing my forehead.

"Don't apologize." Pops said, "It's his fault. You've done nothing wrong."

I didn't know what to say. His voice reassured me that I was in the clear. A sort of aura filled the room, much like that of a church or some sort of holy area. It wanted to make me cry.

But I held it in. I was, after all, in a room full of males.

"Go home, Roku." He said, "And you as well, Hyouko. Go home and rest up. I can tell you need it. Work begins Monday."

(PC)â€|

*later at Old Home*

As the light of the sun grew dim, Roku slowly entered Old Home,

replacing his nametag to its "home" position. The lights ahead at the main corridor were on, indicating that either dinner was being prepared, or already being enjoyed by the girls and the small feathers. Puffing on the cigarette in his lips, Roku dragged his feet along the heavily used dirt "path" that had been eroded from heavy use, which led from the bulletin board to the front door of the main hall.

"And where have you been?" a familiar voice was heard behind him. Automatically, Roku knew who it was; that tom-boyish tone couldn't have come from anyone else's lips.

"Walking," He responded to Kana, "thinkingâ€| smokingâ€| "

"You really should quit that disgusting habit." She commented, flicking the white cylinder away from his mouth. "You're better than that."

"Those are really expensive you knowâ€| "

"Which is a better reason why you should quit." She crossed her arms over her chest, indicating how serious she was. Roku paid no heed; it was his choice to smoke, and smoke he shall.

"Whatever." Roku said, picking up the half extinguished blunt and replacing it on his lips. "I can doâ€|" he puffed, "whatever," he blew smoke toward Kana, "I want." He ended his sentence with a sheepish grin, fully extinguishing his cigarette by crushing it under his shoe.

"Hmph!" Kana pouted, fanning the smoke away with her hand, "Do what you want; It's time for dinner anyway." She started to walk away.

"Kana, wait," Roku said, holding onto the girl's wrist, "I need to talk to you."

"Hmm?"

"I-," The boy began, "I don't know how to put this, exactlyâ€| "

"What is it?" a look of concern grew on Kana's face.

"What do you think of me?" He asked bluntly.

"What?" She blushed profusely, something out of the ordinary for her to do.

"Come onâ€|" He groaned sarcastically, "I can't be THAT bad, can I? Tell me the truth. You think I'm evil? Bad? Am I a good guy?"

"Wellâ€|" She thought for a moment, "You're okay, I guessâ€|" She felt uncomfortable in that awkward moment.

"That's it?" Roku snorted.

"Hmph!" Kana put her hands on her hips, "What do you mean that's it?"

"That's kind of a vague answer, don't you think?" He took a deep breath through his nostrils, "Here, lemme tell you what I think of you."

"This I'd like to hear."

Roku walked over to the middle of the courtyard and looked to the heavens, possibly looking for guidance from the emerging stars in the evening sky.

"You're cool that hang out with," He began, "you can be serious and still be a joy to be around. You're spunky; I like spunkiness, it's probably the most attractive part about girls. You're attitude has some flair about it, it's like you have all the time on your hands to come up with a witty, but truthful remark. And, above all else, you're cute!"

By this time, Kana was wide eyed, and red all over; she hadn't expected this from Roku.

"Jeez, since this morning, I couldn't stop thinking about you!" He turned to face her, "After what happened last night, with Dante and Hikari, I felt something inside me click. I felt that it could have been you in Hikari's shoes; and lord only knows who could have stopped me from bashing Dante's skull in!"

Kana was still speechless.

"Kana," Roku walked to her and held her hand, "It's been, what? 4? 5 months since I've been here? I feel like I don't have much time left in Glie. Something greater is destined for me, but I don't know when and where, but I can feel that it's coming. The cold hard truth is: is that we Haibane do not have the gift of a long life here. Sure, 9 or 10 years may seem like an eternity to you, but that a fraction of a second for me. I really don't want to waste my time here!"

"W-What?" Kana stuttered.

"What I'm trying to say is, Kana, is," He stared deeply into her brown eyes, "I've fallen for you!"

* * *

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11. the beginning

Note: There is none...Enjoy.

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* * *

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_**chapter 11: the beginning
> _

"Hey Kana?" I shouted, from my room, "Could you help me out with this?"

I bounced around from one end of the room to the other; struggling to free myself of the monster on my back; something a normal person would call a dress shirt. I made the mistake of trying to slip it on, instead of unbuttoning it first, and now I was paying the high toll. I was trapped.

"Jeez, you're such a klutz." She muttered, entering my room, "Stay still."

I stopped my frolicking, and stood still, gasping for air. Sweat already dampened the white cotton shirt, enabling me to see a shadowy figure approaching.

"Come, on..." I complained, "I wanna look nice for the Communicator."

During the past eight months, The Communicator and I would meet often and the Haibne Renmei Temple. The motive for our visits were normally just for The Communicator to hear what I had done the past few weeks, and for him to inform me about the Tooga's interests in me. In fact, I was warned to have ammunition carred on me at all time; for what reason I do not know, but I did comply. At any given moment, my revolver was loaded with five bullets, with one chamber being empty (as it would be VERY stupid to have the chamber resting on the hammer loaded. Any sudden pressure could force a misfire and I was knowledgeable enough about firearms to remember this.).

The more The Communicator and I spoke with each other, the less formal we became. The Renmei knew that I was able to communicate to them with sign language, and never put any bells on my wings again (except for the chain-link wing covers).

This meeting was somewhat special though. The message posted on the bulletin board stated that this was to be our final meeting.

After rescuing me from me cloth prison, Kana whipped the shirt into shape and inspected it for any damage. She then replaced the shirt onto my body, and attached each button.

"What would I do without you?" I asked, scratching my head as she worked.

"You'd be mud." She hissed. "Now stand still." She continued dressing me by affixing a navy blue neck-tie. She then finished my outfit with a black sport coat.

"There."

I turned away from her, and looked into the full body mirror. The

black leather boots I wore would certainly keep me warm in this freakishly cold early spring weather, especially since the inside of the boots was lined with fleece. Adding to the warmth was the sweat pants that I wore underneath my black wool slacks. Underneath my shirt was my holster and revolver; never has it left my sight.

I readjusted my tie, centering it between the edges of my collar. As an extra precaution against the extreme weather, I slipped on the black, hooded trench coat that Kana had given me as a present for the End of the year festival. Topping off my outfit was a brown, and extremely long, scarf that Rakka had knitted.

"Wellâ€|" I turned once again to face Kana, "How do I look?"

"Likeâ€|" She thought for a moment, "Like one of those dummies in the clothes store."

"Damnâ€|" I laughed, "I blame you."

"So what do you think he called you in for?" She changed the subject.

"I don't knowâ€|" I led her out of my room. "Probably wants to catch up."

"Can you believe it?" She changed the subject again. "In two days, it'll be your birthday!"

The thought hadn't occurred to me; it truly was nearly a year ago that I was born into this world.

One whole year of rediscovering life.

One whole year of rediscovering myselfâ€|

"Yeaâ€|" I said softly, exiting the building and walking out into the snow covered canvas that used to be the courtyard. Maybe this was the reason this was the final meeting between The Communicator and I.

"You want me to come with you?" She asked me as we stopped at the gates of Old Home. I faced her and contemplated the sight before me.

As usual, she wore brown or dull colored clothing. Her thick military surplus pants hid her figure. The heavy leather jacket she wore gave her a bulky appearance; not to mention the fact that it appeared as though she was hiding a ewe underneath, as wool covered her neck, and the bottom part of her face. The beanie that her wore (which WAS mine to begin with) was too large for her head, and only halted just below her eyebrows.

All in all, she was dressed like a little fat school child.

Though, I couldn't blame her, as the weather seemed to drop in temperature daily.

"No, you go on inside and stay with the others." I said to her, holding her in an inescapable embrace; kissing her on her cold

cheeks, "I'll be back before nightfall."

(PC)â€|

Upon reaching the gates of the Haibane Renmei Temple, Roku was greeted by two Renmei members. Almost immediately, the gate slowly opened, revealing the interior of the temple.

Unfortunately, the garden of trees inside the Temple was unable to escape the harsh winter. What surrounded Roku as he walked past were the brown skeletons of former evergreens, piled upon by the white heavy fluff. They sagged, weighed down by the snow, seeimg as though the trees were sad at the load they had to bear.

As Roku truded onward, he spotted the gazebo, the location of his meeting with The Communicator.

Inside, he spotted the old man sitting opposite of the door, cradling a staff or walking stick on his lap.

"Good afternoon, Roku." The Communicator greeted him.

"Good afternoon." Roku replied, approaching The Communicator.

"My how you've grown over the past yearâ€|"

"Really?" Roku looked at his own sides, "Am I getting taller?"

"No," The Communicator offered Roku a seat next to him, which Roku accepted, "You haven't grown in that wayâ€|. You're a much better Haibane than you were before."

"Obviouslyâ€|" Roku said, indifferent about The Communicator's complements, "I'm just doing what you ordered, sir."

"No. You are living your own life. What you have done within the past year was all by your own free will."

"I guess that kinda trueâ€|"

"Now then." The Communicator placed the bottom tip of his staff on the floor and leaned against the top. "Tell me about your relationship with Kana. From what I've gathered, you two have gotten fairly close to one anotherâ€|"

"Yea, that's true," Roku felt uneasy. During his past meetings, he had never spoken a single word about Kana and his relationship. He wondered who could have rattled them out. "Butâ€| who told you that?"

"A little birdâ€|" The Communicator chuckled. Unknown to Roku, The Communicator was referring to Rakka.

"Hmmmâ€|" Roku eyed The Communicator, "Well, yea it's true. We've went out together, spent a lot of time togetherâ€|" He hesitated a bit, "Alsoâ€| during the winter storm, everyone in Old home moved into the north wing to save on fire woodâ€| Kana moved into my roomâ€|"

"Oh?"

"Ah! W-we haven't doneâ€|thatâ€|" Roku blushed profusely, "I-I know it's not allowed! Hell, I never even thought about it during that timeâ€|" He lied of course; afterall he WAS a young adult male. What else would be going through his mind when sharing th same bed room with a member of the opposite sex? "Of course, the others are fine with the two of us. It's like we've been like this forever."

"Good." The Communicator cleared his throat. "Now onto business. Do you know why I summoned you?"

"Well, yea." Roku scratched his head, "It's our last meeting."

"Yes it is. But I also summoned you to warn youâ€|" He trailed off.

"Warn me about what?" Roku asked.

"Roku, you are a grown man now." It seemed as though The Communicator was changing the subject, "You must make your own choices from now on. I can no longer guide you. In fact, after we part today, we are to no longer give you any special treatment within the Temple. Not only that, YOU must act like the rest of the Haibane. The casual ties between you, the Haibane Renmei and I are to be cut. This is the order of the Tooga."

"I see." Roku looked to the flor, not knowing what else to say. "Them again." His heart began filling with dozens of emotions. Sadness, grief, anger, frustration, confusion. He was losing one of his best friends; all because of the unknown Tooga.

"Yes. That is their wish."

"Did they say why?"

"No, no reason was given. But it is their command, and I suggest that you comply."

"I will."

"There's one last thing I will warn you, though."

"Hmm?" Roku faced The Communicator.

"Remember you're duty as the Guardian of the other Haibane. Do not ever let your guard down. Do not let any harm come to any of them. You are the only one who has the powerâ€| the stopping power. Live by this rule."

Roku's eyes swelled, filling with salty tears. "I will."

"Roku," The Communicator rose, having Roku stand as well, "Do not forget your duty. Do this, and you will become a great asset to the Haibane; to Glie."

The Communicator gave Roku a deep warm hug; as though he were hugging his child. Roku returned the embrace, just as he would if The Communicator were his father.

It was good bye, even though none of them were

leaving.

(PC)â€|

*the next day*

After a long hard, and cold, day's work, I rode home at a casual pace. Kana was pulling overtime at the Clock smith's, for reasons only they know, so there was no rush to get home.

Everyone and everything around me had an unusual aura about it. It was clam, almost sincere, and it creeped the hell out of me.

"Like the calm before a stormâ€|" I said to nobody in particular, as I left the paved roads and entered the outskirts of town.

As I passed a small bridge, the sight of the crossroads that led to the Temple reminded me of what The Communicator told me the day before. I was still a bit sad at the fact that we could no longer act casually in each other's presence. And even though it's not likely that I'll ever set foot in there again, it'll be hard for me to remember that I can't just go up to him during the Tooga's visit and say "hi".

I sped past the crossroad, not wanting to dell upon the past.

*later*

At around four o'clock when Kana and I were taking a late afternoon nap together, when Nemu came bursting in like a bat out of hell.

"Roku! Come quick!" She yelled, pulling the blanket off of us. "Hurry up!"

"Whaaaat!" I growled, slowly getting out of bed.

"Come on!" She tossed me a pair of my jeans and my trench coat, "No time to explain! Get dressed!"

"You knowâ€|" I said while yawning, "While I putting these on, you could save some time and tell me what the hells going onâ€|" I shook Kana awake.

"Hikari hasn't come home!" She frantically jumped up and down, "And I heard that Dante's missing as well!"

"What!" I quickly retrieved my revolver and pocketed it into my trench coat. "When did this happen! Why didn't you tell me sooner!"

"I just got news of it right now!"

"Son of a bitch!"

(PC)â€|

It seemed as though the entire male population of Glie was out and about, away from the town itself, searching for the missing Haibane

and the wanted criminal. There were search hounds, uniformed officials, farmers, worried fathers; all anxious to get the sexual offender back in his place.

Roku was probably to most adamant of the search party. He didn't really care about Dante anymore; all he was searching for was Hikari. He felt that if anything were to happen to her, he would fail as a Haibane.

As the sun began to set over the western horizon, Roku, in a desperate attempt to find his missing "sister", broke away from the search party, going off the beaten paths of the forests, and entering a small clearing several hundred yards away from where he had gone astray from the rest of the group.

He leaned against a tree, studying the small, white field before him. Only the sound of dogs barking in the distance, and his own deep breaths broke the silence.

Then, he heard a shuffling noise not too far from where he stood.

"Hello?" He called out, "Hikari?"

The muffled sound became louder as he stepped closer. Soon, the sounds were given a "face"; a small lump of snow in the middle of the field.

Roku started running toward the pile of snow.

"Hikari!" He yelled.

"DON'T MOVE!" To Roku's surprise, the pile of snow yelled back.

"What?" Roku stopped in his tracks.

"Don't move!" It growled. Slowly the pile stood up, revealing, to Roku's horror, Dante, holding a lifeless Hikari in his arms. Dante himself looked beaten and worn. His beard was shaggy and unkept, his hair poked out from underneath his black beanie, and his eyes were as red as the blood dripping from his nose.

"What'd you do to her!" Roku demanded an answer.

"Damn you!" Dante ignored his question, "I could have had her! but nooo! you had to come waltzing in here!"

Roku noticed the blood trickling down Hikari's forehead. Upon closer inspection, a small lump began to form near the origin of the blood trail.

"You BASTARD!" Roku reached into his coat and drew his revolver, "You hit her! How could you!"

"Simple!" Dante slowly bent over and picked up a rock, "Like this!" He swung the rock toward Hikari's face.

"SON OF A BITCH!" Roku pulled the trigger of his revolver. His aim couldn't have been more perfect. The copper coated, lead slug flew as

straight as an arrow into it's intended target: Dante's head. Both Dante and Hikari fell onto the snow, making a crunch sound.

Roku threw his revolver to his side and ran to recover Hikari, who was covered in a bloody mess.

Within seconds, he was surrounded by members of the search party, curious as to what the loud explosion was. They all gasped in horror at the ghastly sight before them. A few feet from where Roku sat with Hikari in his arms, was Dante's corpse lying on top of a pile of iced blood.

Several of the men asked Roku what had happened, but he sat there quietly, cradling the injured Hikari. As doctors arrived, they pried Roku's arms away from her limp body and onto a stretcher, where she was immediately rushed to the town hospital.

the next day

(PC)â€|

I couldn't sleep the night before.

In the back of my head, I kept repeating to myself that I had failed as a Haibane. I let one of my own become harmed. Even though the doctor that came to inform us of Hikari's status said that the damage was minimal, and that she would be able to come home tonight, I was still devastated.

Gordon and Maggie stopped by in the morning to apologize for what Dante did, and to forgive what I had done to their son.

"He brought it upon himselfâ€|" Gordon said, trying to hide the mourning of his son, "You did what you had to, Roku. I'mâ€| glad that you were there to stop him before anything else happenedâ€|"

(PC)â€|

Shortly after twelve noon, Kana came into Roku's room, carrying with her a slip of paper. She walked over to the dining table where he sat and set the sheet before him.

"It'sâ€|" She started, "It's from the Renmeiâ€|"

Roku read the message out loud:

"FEATHER ROKU,

YOU ARE SUMMONED TO THE TEMPLE IMMEDIATELY. BRING WITH YOU ALL YOUR PERSONAL BELONGINGS."

"Niceâ€|" Roku said sarcastically. He turned away from Kana, hiding something to himself.

"What do you think they want?" She asked. She tried to force him to turn around by pulling on his shoulder.

"I don't knowâ€|" He said, getting up from the chair. He looked back at Kana with deep concern. He slowly turned toward her, and exposed

his right arm. Kana gasped at the sight before her: Black veins were forming on his arm, slowly spreading out, throbbing as it moved.

"Iâ€œ|" Kana didn't know what to say.

"I thinkâ€œ|" Roku began, "I thinkâ€œ| this isâ€œ| my punishmentâ€œ| ."

"Noâ€œ|" Kana shook her head, "Don't go!"

"You know I have tooâ€œ| "

"No!" She cried, "Today's you're birthday! We're supposed to go visit Hikari at the hospital! I heard she's awake already! Rakka and I baked a cake! Nemu even decorated the dining room! You can't go now!" She fooled herself, knowing full well that the inevitable was unavoidable.

"You know I have tooâ€œ| " Roku said, embracing the crying girl, "Goodbye, Kanaâ€œ| "

**at the haibane renmei temple**

Roku had on his back, a back pack full of clothes, several books that he had bought, his revolver and holster, the box of ammunition. He wore his usual gray longsleeve, brown plaid dress shirt, black jeans, white shoes, and black beanie. Around his neck was the silver necklace and the blue cube that the Tooga had given him. In his front pocket was his cigarettes and his lighter. And in his back pocket was Kana's pocket watch, which she had given to him as a birthday present.

With leather strapped bells on his wings, and a stern face, Roku approached The Communicator. The mutual feeling of warm friendship was gone. This was clearly business.

"Feather Roku." The Communicator said, "Do you know why you have been summoned?"

He raised his right wing, to indicate the answer "yes". He assumed that he was to be executed for killing a man.

"I think not." The Communicator said, "Follow me."

They entered through a small cavern near where the gazebo was located. Every few feet, torches were lit and strung along the walls of the stone cavern. The winding hall gave the impression that they were inside the belly of a gigantic snake. Several dozen twists and turns and flights of stairs later, the two of them reached a literal hole in the wall.

"Enter." The Communicator commanded.

With a bit of an effort, Roku squeezed into the hole and out the other side. Behind him followed the Communicator.

To Roku's surprise, the room that they had entered was lavishly decorated with various pictures and pictographs on the walls. The pictographs looked immensely complicated, so Roku didn't even try to

decipher them. It seemed as though the room was split in half. The left side contained colorful paintings of fields, tables full of food, and other exciting looking things. The right however, was nothing but black paintings of people, dressed in elaborate gowns and uniforms. Directly ahead were two holes carved into the wall, toward the left, and the other toward the right. The holes couldn't have been much bigger than Roku's own head.

"Place your revolver and box of ammunition into the hole on the left side." The Communicator ordered.

Roku set his bag down and began digging, retrieving his weapon, and the box. He then crept over to the hole, and placed the items inside.

"Nowâ€|" The Communicator said, "Placed the blue cube you acquired from the Tooga into the hole on the right."

Roku took the small cube that hung around his neck and placed it into the hole. He then walked back to The Communicator and stood by his side.

"Roku." The Communicator said, "These items are a symbol of your life. The Revolver is a familiar item from your past. You are most comfortable around it, and yet, you hate having to bear the burden of carrying it with you. The cube, however, represents your future. Now matter how many times you look at it or admire its appearance, it's still unknown as to what it contains."

Roku kept a straight face.

"Choose, Feather Roku. I cannot guarantee where you will end up. You have been to many places in the past, and whichever one is cherished to you the most is where you will go. That however is a question that only you can provide the answer for. And it goes without saying that the future holds no bounds. Choose, Roku. You cannot stay in the current state that you are in."

Roku looked at his own right arm. His hands were now fully covered in the black veins.

"They will consume your entire body within the hour."

(PC)â€|

One hour to choose my fate.

As my life in Glie flashed before my eyes, I realized exactly what I had to do. There was no way I was choosing the past over the future. This was my home. This is where I began life anew. The town of Glie was my future.

I walked over to the hole on the right, trying to get a peek inside before I reached it. I took a deep breath, still uneasy about the whole situation.

"A choice must be made, Roku." The Communicator reminded me.

I cleared my throat, and after a bit of hesitation, I spoke, "It's not good to dwell in the pastâ€|"

I reached into the hole, and instantly, I was surrounded by a blinding white lightâ€|

(PC)â€|

*²months later*

Glie was once again abuzz with activity. It was the start of another summer harvest festival, and everyone was preparing for the arrival of new goods to be shipped by the Tooga. The residents of Old Home were no exception.

"Come on!" Nemu yelled to the others, "Here they come!"

As soon as she finished shouting, the crowd around her fell silent, knowing full well that it was taboo to speak in the Tooga's presence.

A tent was pitched a dozen yards to the left of the town gate. Two Renmei stood guard at the entrance to the tent, indicating that The Communicator was inside.

The girls gazed in awe, much like everyone else, as the gates of Glie opened. A wall of solemn and cloaked people were revealed, waiting for the gates to fully open before making their entrance. As the last of the Tooga filed in, the gates were once again closed.

A gong sounded, and immediately, everyone's attention shifted to the left, and at the tent of The Communicator.

The girls tried to keep as quiet as possible. Rakka and Hikari held their mouths closed with their hands, while Nemu had to cover Kana's with all of her strength.

The sight before them was the biggest shock of their lives.

It was the one armed Communicator.

*²THE END*

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disclaimer: with the exception of Roku, Gordon, Magdalene, Naota, The town Mayor and the names "Horton" for the old clothes dealer, and "Dante" for the assistant baker, I do not own any characters that have made an appearance in the story. I did this for fun, not for money. If you own these characters, please don't sue me. Please don't ruin my fun. Also, if you wish to paste this onto your site, please ask permission first and give credit where credit's due.

12. epilogue

*²Epilogue*

I was shivering in my cloak. I didn't know how to begin with the Tooga. Nothing was given to me to prepare me for this event.

Out of the corner of my eyes, or the eyeholes of my mask I should say, I spotted the girls, frantically trying to stay silent. I longed to be with them; to be with Kanaâ€!

But I knew what had to be done.

Now I truly was the guardian of the Haibane.

I approached who looked to be the leader of the Tooga. I recalled what The Communicator had said to me in last year's summer harvest; that there were new Tooga, and that this was their first time in Glie.

"Welcome," I said in sign language. "Welcome to Glie."

"Hello," The leader replied. "It's nice to meet you again, Roku."

I stepped back, realizing who I was communicating with. I saw straight through the mask of hers, recognizing the piercing black eyes, the silky black hair, and the fair skin. I had to stop myself from shouting her name.

"Reki?"

**END**

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End
file.